

Contents

1	Creation and Fall— <i>September 29–October 5</i> —————	6
2	Causes of Disunity— <i>October 6–12</i> —————	14
3	“That They All May Be One”— <i>October 13–19</i> —————	22
4	The Key to Unity— <i>October 20–26</i> —————	30
5	The Experience of Unity in the Early Church <i>October 27–November 2</i> —————	38
6	Images of Unity— <i>November 3–9</i> —————	46
7	When Conflicts Arise— <i>November 10–16</i> —————	56
8	Unity in Faith— <i>November 17–23</i> —————	64
9	The Most Convincing Proof— <i>November 24–30</i> —————	72
10	Unity and Broken Relationships— <i>December 1–7</i> —————	80
11	Unity in Worship— <i>December 8–14</i> —————	88
12	Church Organization and Unity— <i>December 15–21</i> —————	96
13	Final Restoration of Unity— <i>December 22–28</i> —————	104

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Our Unity in Christ

The church is God's family on earth: serving, studying, and worshiping together. Looking to Jesus as its Leader and Redeemer, the church is called to take the good news of salvation to all people.

Number 12 of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church states, in part: "The church is the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In continuity with the people of God in Old Testament times, we are called out from the world; and we join together for worship, for fellowship, for instruction in the Word, for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for service to all mankind, and for the worldwide proclamation of the gospel."—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2005), p. 163.

But what do we mean by church? Who belongs to the church? The answer to these questions depends in part on our definition of the church.

A church is certainly the local community of believers in Jesus who obey the Lord and who assemble themselves for worship and service. They can meet in house churches or in larger congregations (*Rom. 16:10, 11*). By church we also mean the building in which Christians assemble. But this is hardly the best definition of the church. The church is about people, not about buildings.

In the New Testament, the church sometimes is referred to as the group of believers in a particular geographical area. So, when Paul addressed the church in Galatia, he referred to many local congregations in towns and villages in that region (*Gal. 1:2*;

see also 1 Pet. 1:1). By church we sometimes also mean a group of people who belong to a particular denomination or who call themselves by a particular name given for their beliefs and heritage.

Yet, all these definitions are incomplete. The church is the people of God all over the earth. And though Christ has faithful followers in various denominations (many of whom will in the final crisis join God's remnant [Rev. 18:1–4]), this quarter we are going to focus on our church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and what unity in Christ means to us.

Fundamental Belief 14, called Unity in the Body of Christ, states: "The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children."—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 201.

"Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children."

The purpose of this series of Bible study lessons is to provide biblical instruction on the topic of Christian unity for us as Seventh-day Adventists, who, now, as always, face challenges to that unity, and will until the end of time.

However, in the Scriptures we find numerous insights and instructions on how to live God's gift of oneness in Christ. Those insights, those instructions about living out and expressing in our church the unity we have been given, are the focus of this quarter.

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What do an 11-year-old boy in Thailand, a dog in Indonesia, and a mission pilot in the Philippines have in common? They are united by mission in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, which will receive this quarter's Thirteen Sabbath Offering.

Read more in the Youth and Adult Mission Quarterly (bit.ly/adultmission) and the Children's Mission Quarterly (bit.ly/childrensmisson).

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Creation *and* Fall



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 1:26, 27; 1 John 4:7, 8, 16; Gen. 3:16–19; Gen. 11:1–9; Gal. 3:29; Deut. 7:6–11.*

Memory Text: “Then [God] brought [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (*Genesis 15:5, 6, NKJV*).

The story of God's people starts with the creation of humans and their tragic fall into sin. Any attempt at understanding the nature of unity in the church must begin with God's original plan at the Creation and then the need for restoration after the Fall.

The first chapters of the Bible reveal that God intended for humanity to remain one family. Unfortunately, this unity was severed after the tragedy of sin. In sin alone the roots of disunity and division arose, more of disobedience's foul consequences. We get a hint of this division in the immediate interaction between Adam and Eve when God first approached them after they ate of the forbidden tree (*see Gen. 3:11*). Hence, among all else that the plan of salvation will accomplish, the restoration of this original unity is one crucial goal, as well.

Abraham, the father of God's people, became a key player in God's plan of salvation. Abraham is depicted in Scripture as the great example of “righteousness by faith” (*see Rom. 4:1–5*), the kind of faith that unites God's people with each other and with the Lord Himself. God works through people to restore unity and to make His will known to lost humankind.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 6.

Love as a Foundation of Unity

A clear message flowing out of the Creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 is the overall harmony that existed at the end of the week of Creation. God's final words that all was "very good" (*Gen. 1:31*) refer not only to aesthetic beauty but also to the absence of any element of evil or discord when God finished making this world and the humans who were to populate it. God's original purpose in Creation included the harmonious coexistence and interdependent relationship of all life forms. It was a beautiful world created for the human family. All was perfect and worthy of its Creator. God's ideal and original purpose for the world was one of harmony, unity, and love.

Read Genesis 1:26, 27. What do these verses teach about human uniqueness in contrast to the rest of the earthly creation as depicted in Genesis 1 and 2?

Genesis says that God created humankind in His image, something not said about anything else in the Genesis Creation account. "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;' . . . So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (*Gen. 1:26, 27, NKJV*). Although theologians have debated for centuries the exact nature of this image, and the nature of God Himself, many passages of Scripture present God's nature as love.

Read 1 John 4:7, 8, 16. How can these verses help us to understand how we were originally created and how this could have impacted the original unity found at the Creation?

God is love, and because humans also can love (and in ways that the rest of the earthly creation certainly can't), to be created in His image must include the ability to love. Yet, love can exist only in relationship with others. Thus, whatever else being made in the image of God entails, it must entail the capacity to love, and to love deeply.

The Consequences of the Fall

The consequences of the Fall were enormous. The disobedience of Adam and Eve started the rupture of a harmonious interdependence between all life forms. Even worse, it started the disunity, discord, and divisions among human beings that exist even today. The disharmony is seen immediately in how Adam and Eve sought to put the blame for the Fall on others (*Gen. 3:12, 13*). Things have become only worse since.

Read Genesis 3:16–19 and Genesis 4:1–15. What in these verses reveal the results of sin and its impact on the harmonious world God had created?

Adam's disobedience became the source of many events and consequences that over time affected all of God's creation. The natural world itself began to suffer from the consequences of sin. Human relationships also were affected. Cain and Abel, two brothers who should have loved and cared for each other, were estranged because one wished to follow his own selfish inclinations instead of following God's prescribed mode of worship. This estrangement resulted in violence and death. Cain's reaction, however, was more directed at God than at Abel. He felt angry toward God (*Gen. 4:5*), and this anger led to resentment toward Abel. Disobedience further ruptured human relationships.

"Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (*Gen. 6:5, NKJV*). This evil ultimately led to the Flood and to the incredible devastation of God's original creation left in the Flood's wake. But even then God did not give up on the human race, but left a remnant, Noah and his family, to start again.

After the Flood, God gave a promise to Noah and his family. The rainbow in the sky always would remind them of His care and promises, of His kindness and mercy (*Gen. 9:12–17, Isa. 54:7–10*). God instituted a covenant with Noah and reinstated His original plan to have a united human family faithful to Him and His Word.

What are the ways that sin brings disharmony? What choices can you make right now to help restore harmony among those whom your choices can impact in a powerful way?

Further Disunity and Separation

Read Genesis 11:1–9. What happened here that makes the problem of separation and disunity worse?

The next events chronicled by the Bible after the Flood are the construction of the Tower of Babel, the confusion of languages, and then the dispersion of people, who so far had spoken one language. Perhaps attracted by the beauty of the land between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, and the fertility of the soil, some of the descendants of Noah decided to build themselves a city and a high-towered structure in the land of Shinar, today's southern Iraq (*Gen. 11:2*).

Archaeology has shown that Mesopotamia was a densely populated region from earliest historical times. Among these people were the Sumerians, who are credited with inventing the art of writing on clay tablets. They built well-constructed houses and were masters in the production of jewelry, tools, and household utensils. Excavations also have uncovered many tower-like temples dedicated to the worship of various deities.

The descendants of Noah who settled in the land of Shinar soon forgot the God of Noah and the promises He had made to never again destroy the world by a flood. Building the Tower of Babel was a monument to their superior wisdom and skills. Their desire for renown and reputation, to “make a name for ourselves” (*Gen. 11:4, NKJV*), was one motive for this building project. “According to the divine purpose, men were to have preserved unity through the bond of true religion. When idolatry and polytheism broke this inner spiritual bond, they lost not only unity of religion but also the spirit of brotherhood. A project such as the tower, to preserve by outward means the inward unity which had been lost, could never succeed.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, pp. 284, 285.

The fall of Adam and Eve shattered the unity of the human race and God's original plan. It resulted in confusion regarding worship; the widespread dissemination of evil and immorality over the earth; and ultimately the separation of humanity into many different cultures, languages, and races that often have been at odds with one another since.

What are practical steps we can take to help heal the divisions of race, culture, and language that hurt us even in the church?

Abraham, Father of God's People

The three great monotheistic world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, look to Abraham as their father. For Christians, this association is a spiritual relationship. When called to leave his country in Mesopotamia, Abraham was told that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (*Gen. 12:3, NKJV*; see also *Gen. 18:18, 22:18*). The blessing came through Jesus.

Read Hebrews 11:8–19, Romans 4:1–3, and Galatians 3:29. What elements of Abraham’s faith do these texts mention, and how do they relate to the idea of Christian unity? That is, what can be found in these texts that can help us today to understand what a crucial component of Christian unity should be?

As father of all believers, Abraham gives us some of the basic elements central to Christian unity. First, he practiced obedience. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (*Heb. 11:8, NKJV*). Second, he had hope in the promises of God. “By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (*Heb. 11:9, 10, NKJV*). Third, he believed that God would give him a son and that one day his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. On the basis of this response, God justified him by faith (*Rom. 4:1–3*). Fourth, he trusted in God’s plan of salvation. The greatest test to Abraham’s faith came when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (*Gen. 22:1–19, Heb. 11:17–19*).

The Old Testament describes Abraham as a friend of God (*2 Chron. 20:7, Isa. 41:8*). His life of faith, his unwavering obedience, and his confidence in God’s promises make him an example of what our Christian lives should be now.

Think about your actions and words over the next few days. In what ways can you seek to make sure that whatever you say or do reflects the reality of your faith?

God's Chosen People

In calling Abraham to be His servant, God chose for Himself a people to represent Him to the world. This calling and election was an act of God's love and grace. God's call to Israel was central to His plan for the restoration of all humanity after the devastation and disunity caused by the Fall. Sacred history is the study of God's work toward this restoration, and a major component of that plan was the covenant nation of Israel.

According to Deuteronomy 7:6–11, why did God call Israel His people? Why did He choose the descendants of Abraham as His people?

God's love for humankind is at the center of the election of Israel as His people. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants in order to preserve the knowledge of God through His people and to bring about the Redemption of humanity (*Ps. 67:2*). Yet, it is a supreme act of love that made God choose Israel. The descendants of Abraham had nothing to boast about to claim God's unmerited love. “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples” (*Deut. 7:7, NKJV*).

It is a strange reversal of values that God uses to select His people. While humans look at power, wisdom, and self-confidence to select leaders, God does not choose the strong and mighty to serve Him, but those who sense or acknowledge their weakness, folly, and nothingness, that no one might glory before Him (*1 Cor. 1:26–31*).

Yet, look at the privilege that was theirs: “God desired to make of His people Israel a praise and a glory. Every spiritual advantage was given them. God withheld from them nothing favorable to the formation of character that would make them representatives of Himself.

“Their obedience to the law of God would make them marvels of prosperity before the nations of the world. He who could give them wisdom and skill in all cunning work would continue to be their teacher, and would ennoble and elevate them through obedience to His laws. If obedient, they would be preserved from the diseases that afflicted other nations, and would be blessed with vigor of intellect. The glory of God, His majesty and power, were to be revealed in all their prosperity. They were to be a kingdom of priests and princes. God furnished them with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the earth.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 288.

What parallels can we find between what God did for ancient Israel and the calling He had for them, and what He has done for us and the calling He has for us as Seventh-day Adventists? Bring your answers to class on Sabbath.

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Creation,” pp. 44–51; “The Call of Abraham,” pp. 125–131, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

God’s original purpose in the creation of humanity also is reflected in the institutions of the family (*Gen. 2:21–24*) and the Sabbath. The Sabbath was intended for all humanity, as Jesus clearly indicated in Mark 2:27, 28. In fact, its universal nature is seen in the Genesis account itself, when God set aside the seventh day, not only before the calling out of Israel as His covenant people but even before the introduction of sin. What a powerfully unifying force the Sabbath could have been if all people had kept it. It was the day of rest God intended to remind the descendants of Adam and Eve of their common bond to Him and to one another. “The Sabbath and the family were alike instituted in Eden, and in God’s purpose they are indissolubly linked together. On this day more than on any other, it is possible for us to live the life of Eden. It was God’s plan for the members of the family to be associated in work and study, in worship and recreation, the father as priest of his household, and both father and mother as teachers and companions of their children.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 535.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does the Genesis account of the creation of the woman from the side of Adam reveal the close and intimate bond that should exist between a husband and wife? What does that tell us about why, all through the Bible, God uses the imagery of a husband and wife as an example of the kind of closeness He seeks with His people?
- 2 Although the story of the Tower of Babel tells us that human ethnic and linguistic diversity were not part of God’s original plan for humanity, how can we transcend such natural divisions today? How can the church still experience unity and harmony even if it is made up of people of many nations and languages?
- 3 What are some of the parallels you found between the calling of ancient Israel and our calling as Seventh-day Adventists? More important, what lessons can we learn from them that should help us to be faithful to our divine calling in Christ?

Summary: God’s original plan at Creation intended for humanity to live harmoniously and in unity as one family. The disobedience of our first parents caused an interruption in God’s plan. Yet, God called Abraham to establish a people through whom He can keep alive the promise of restoration that is found only in Christ.

No More Sabbath Classes

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Seventh-day Adventist students who wish to become nurses no longer face a Sabbath conflict with the opening of the church's first nursing school in Bangladesh.

The three-story facility that houses the Bangladesh Adventist Nursing Institute was funded in part by a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering and stands on the campus of the Bangladesh Adventist Seminary and College in Gowlbathan Kaliakoir, a town located a two-hour drive from the country's capital, Dhaka.

"This place will send hundreds of missionaries all over this vast and mighty country, and it will be a blessing from heaven," Adventist Church president Ted N. C. Wilson said at a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the nursing school in late 2016. "May God bless this nursing college."

The school, which has room for 100 students, opened for classes in 2017.

The new building—with 10 classrooms, four laboratories, a conference room, and other facilities—received US\$150,000 of its \$400,000 price tag from a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering given by church members worldwide in third quarter 2015, said Myrun Ju Lee, president of the Bangladesh Adventist Seminary and College. Another \$100,000 came from the Adventist Church's Southern Asia-Pacific Division, whose territory of 14 countries includes Bangladesh, and the rest came from individual donors in South Korea.

Saw Samuel, president of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, described the establishment of the nursing school as a remarkable accomplishment that would not have been possible without the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering.

"This is a milestone," Samuel said. "This is the first Adventist health training institute in Bangladesh."

The school also offers local Adventist students the opportunity to study nursing in their own country.

"It is really important for our school here in Bangladesh to be able to have a school of nursing because there is no place where an Adventist young person can go to school to take nursing without having to go to school on Sabbath," said Kevin Costello, associate executive secretary at the division. "Now we will finally have a facility that will be open and available for them so they can

get a nursing degree and honor God on the Sabbath as well."

Thank you for your mission offerings that helped make it possible to open the Bangladesh Adventist Nursing School.



Adventist Church president TED N. C. WILSON, second from left, visiting the Bangladesh Adventist Nursing Institute, background.

Causes of Disunity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 28:1–14, Jer. 3:14–18, Judg. 17:6, 1 Kings 12:1–16, 1 Cor. 1:10–17, Acts 20:25–31.*

Memory Text: “ ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding’ ” (*Proverbs 9:10, NKJV*).

Old Testament prophets repeatedly called upon the people of Israel to obey God's instructions. Disobedience and carelessness would lead to apostasy and disunity. Obedience to God's laws was intended as a means to preserve the people from the natural consequences of sin and to sanctify them in the midst of many foreign nations. Following God's will would create harmony among the people and strengthen their community resolve to withstand the inroads of the pagan and evil worship practices that surrounded them from almost every direction. God's intention was for His people to be holy and to be a witness to the nations around them.

As the Lord said to them after delivering the Hebrews from Egypt: “ ‘Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” ’ ” (*Deut. 4:5, 6, NKJV*).

No question: were they to remain faithful, His people would be greatly blessed and would have been a blessing to others. Unfaithfulness, though, would lead to a host of problems, disunity being just one of many.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 13.*

“Return, O Backsliding Children”

The history of the people of Israel is filled with stories of disobedience and anarchy, followed by a return to God and obedience, and then followed again with more disobedience and conflicts. This pattern repeats itself again and again. Each time God’s people consciously followed His will, they were blessed with peace and life. Each time they disobeyed and followed their own ways, their lives became miserable, filled with wars and conflicts. Even before Israel entered the Promised Land, God had predicted this pattern and offered the solution to avoid such dire consequences to their existence.

Read Deuteronomy 28:1–14. What blessings would come to Israel if the people were obedient to God’s will?

Read Jeremiah 3:14–18. What do we learn from God’s call to Israel to repent and return to Him? What does it tell us about God’s love and patience for His people?

What is amazing in the book of Jeremiah is how God is seen as loving, merciful, and generous toward His people in spite of their rebellion, division, and idolatry. God constantly is inviting His people to return to Him and to repent from their wayward actions. Again and again God promised restoration and hope for the future.

“ ‘ “Return, backsliding Israel,” says the LORD; “I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,” says the LORD; “I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God, and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice,” says the LORD’ ” (*Jer. 3:12, 13, NKJV*).

Jeremiah’s words were spoken at a time of general neglect of God’s Word. Although some reforms were started in the time of King Josiah, most people felt no spiritual urge to continue in faithful obedience to God. Their sins, idolatry, and self-centered lives were causing spiritual and political ruin. The more they regressed from doing God’s will, the more dreadful would be their future prospects. Yet, through Jeremiah, God pleaded with them. God had a better future in mind for them, and He longed to bring them back to prosperity, unity, and health. But this could come only if they would live by faith and all that true faith entails.

What has the difference between obedience and disobedience meant in your own life?

“Right in His Own Eyes”

Stories from the book of Judges show the numerous negative consequences of Israel not following the Lord’s will. Soon after Israel entered into Canaan, people began to pattern their spiritual lives on the false religions of the Canaanites surrounding them—exactly what they were told not to do! Unfortunately, that wasn’t the only problem they were facing either.

Read Judges 17:6 and Judges 21:25. What do these verses teach about more problems that arose among God’s people?

Talk about a recipe for division and disunity among God’s people. The unity of the nation was to be found in their loyal obedience to the Lord of the covenant, the covenant that they had entered into with God. By doing, however, what was right in their own eyes—especially as they were being influenced by the surrounding nations—they were on the sure road to disaster. We are all fallen beings, and if left to our own devices, if left to follow the inclinations of our hearts, we’ll surely wander from the path that God calls us to walk on.

What do the following passages tell us about the spiritual and social conditions of Israel during the time of the judges?

Judg. 2:11–13 _____

Judg. 3:5–7 _____

“The Lord had through Moses set before His people the result of unfaithfulness. By refusing to keep His covenant, they would cut themselves off from the life of God, and His blessing could not come upon them. At times these warnings were heeded, and rich blessings were bestowed upon the Jewish nation and through them upon surrounding peoples. But more often in their history they forgot God and lost sight of their high privilege as His representatives. They robbed Him of the service He required of them, and they robbed their fellow men of religious guidance and a holy example. They desired to appropriate to themselves the fruits of the vineyard over which they had been made stewards. Their covetousness and greed caused them to be despised even by the heathen. Thus the Gentile world was given occasion to misinterpret the character of God and the laws of His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 20, 21.

How do our own actions as a church impact those around us? What do they see in Seventh-day Adventists that would impress them in a positive manner?

The Division of the Hebrew Nation

The path of apostasy, and its dire consequences, didn't happen overnight. But the wrong choices and decisions that accumulated over the long centuries finally led to some terrible consequences for God's people.

Read the story of King Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12:1–16. What caused this terrible division among God's people?

“Had Rehoboam and his inexperienced counselors understood the divine will concerning Israel, they would have listened to the request of the people for decided reforms in the administration of the government. But in the hour of opportunity that came to them during the meeting in Shechem, they failed to reason from cause to effect, and thus forever weakened their influence over a large number of the people. Their expressed determination to perpetuate and add to the oppression introduced during Solomon's reign was in direct conflict with God's plan for Israel, and gave the people ample occasion to doubt the sincerity of their motives. In this unwise and unfeeling attempt to exercise power, the king and his chosen counselors revealed the pride of position and authority.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 90.

What do the following statements say about the need for wisdom in making the right decisions? Where is the source of true wisdom?

Prov. 4:1–9 _____

Prov. 9:10 _____

James 1:5 _____

The story of Rehoboam and his rash and unwise decision to impose more conscripted labor on his people is a sad event in the life of the kingdom of Israel. The king sought counsel from two groups of advisors, but his final decision to follow the counsel of less experienced young men his own age brought a catastrophe on the kingdom that his father Solomon and grandfather David had built during the preceding 80 years. The advice that the king should intimidate the crowd by declaring that he is tougher than his father was foolish counsel. The young advisors believed that to be sympathetic of the people's demands for less rigorous labor was not the leadership style the king should adopt. He should, they said, present himself as ruthless and cruel instead. In the end, he showed himself to be a bully and undeserving of his people's allegiance and faithfulness. Hence, a division occurred among God's people that never should have been there and that was never God's plan for His people.

Schism in Corinth

Unfortunately, the issue of disunity among God's people didn't end even in New Testament times.

For example, the first four chapters of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians are an appeal for unity. While in Ephesus Paul heard that various divisions had erupted in the church at Corinth. Thus, he begins his letter with a lengthy address on church unity and the need to avoid schism. Paul is concerned about this development, and he seeks to provide inspired counsel to remedy this unfortunate situation.

According to 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, what seems to have been the cause of disunity, of their divisions and quarrels?

Paul became concerned for his brothers and sisters in Corinth when someone from Chloe's people told him about the divisions and quarrels among them. His opening words show the depth of his concern: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you." His solution was to remind them that, as Christians, they were to be joined together "in the same mind and in the same judgment" (*1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV*). Whatever exactly was causing this contention and division, Paul wanted it stopped.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that Christians are called to follow Christ, not a human being—however talented or gifted or called that person may be. While they seemed to have divided themselves along "party" lines, the apostle stated unequivocally that such divisiveness was not according to Christ's will. He asserted that Christian unity is centered on Christ and His sacrifice on the cross (*1 Cor. 1:13*).

Christian unity finds its source in the truth as it is found in Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and in no one else, no matter how "worthy" a mentor or preacher or leader that person might be. At the foot of the cross we are all on the same level ground. Our baptism is into Jesus, who alone can cleanse us from sin. However, we must work toward this unity in Christ in practical ways.

What this should say to us is that as Seventh-day Adventists, we cannot take for granted our unity of faith and mission. Divisions and quarrels can undermine the unity of our church today unless the love and lordship of Christ unites us to Him.

How can we learn to avoid the kind of dangers that Paul was dealing with here? Why must we always be careful about how much loyalty we give to any person other than Christ?

“Wolves Will Come”

Read Acts 20:25–31. What did Paul warn the Ephesian elders about? What were they to do to prevent this from happening?

During his ministry Paul often faced opposition, and he knew that it would be difficult to preserve the purity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his farewell to the Ephesian elders he drew from the watchman analogy in Ezekiel 33:1–6 to tell fellow leaders that they also were responsible for safeguarding the gospel. They were to be faithful shepherds of their congregations.

Paul’s use of the expression “savage wolves” to describe false teachers (*Acts 20:29, NKJV*) is reminiscent of Jesus’ similar warning that false teachers would disguise themselves in sheep’s clothing (*Matt. 7:15*). These false teachers did arise soon after Paul spoke this warning, and they preyed upon believers in the Asian churches that he had established. In Ephesians 5:6–14 and Colossians 2:8, we see some of Paul’s warnings to churches in Asia Minor.

In his Second Epistle to Timothy, Paul also warns Timothy, who is responsible for the church at Ephesus, against errors in the church and godlessness in the last days.

Read 2 Timothy 2:14–19 and 3:12–17. What does Paul say to Timothy about how to counter false teachers and to preserve the unity of the church?

First, Timothy should know his Bible, “rightly dividing the word of truth” (*2 Tim. 2:15, NKJV*). The antidote to these useless disputes and speculations is to correctly understand and teach the word given by God. The truths of the Bible must be rightly interpreted so that no part of the Scriptures will be set in opposition to the entire picture presented in the Bible, and also to prevent misinterpretations that may cause one to lose faith in Jesus. Irrelevancies and secondary issues are to be subordinated to the principles of God’s Word that actually will prepare believers to live a victorious life in Christ. Paul’s second recommendation is for Timothy himself to “shun profane and idle babblings” (*2 Tim. 2:16, NKJV*). Trivial and speculative topics are not to be part of Timothy’s teaching ministry if he is to be considered a worthy and faithful minister. These types of conversations lead only to more ungodliness and do not edify the faith of believers (*2 Tim. 2:16*). Truth alone leads to godliness and harmony among believers. The reason Timothy must avoid and urge his people to avoid such errors is that they sweep through the church like a disease (*2 Tim. 2:17*). In the end, obedience to the Word of God is the antidote to false teaching (*2 Tim. 3:14–17*) that could threaten the unity of the church.

How can we, as a church, protect ourselves from similar kinds of people who, through false teachings, could bring divisions among us?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Rending of the Kingdom,” pp. 87–98, in *Prophets and Kings*; “A Message of Warning and Entreaty,” pp. 298–308, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The Lord desires His chosen servants to learn how to unite in harmonious effort. It may seem to some that the contrast between their gifts and the gifts of a fellow laborer is too great to allow them to unite in harmonious effort; but when they remember that there are varied minds to be reached, and that some will reject the truth as it is presented by one laborer, only to open their hearts to God’s truth as it is presented in a different manner by another laborer, they will hopefully endeavor to labor together in unity. Their talents, however diverse, may all be under the control of the same Spirit. In every word and act, kindness and love will be revealed; and as each worker fills his appointed place faithfully, the prayer of Christ for the unity of His followers will be answered, and the world will know that these are His disciples.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 483.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 The question of doing what is right in one’s “own eyes” is nothing new. Postmodernism, which challenges the idea of any one central or overarching intellectual or moral authority, could potentially pave the way for the kind of moral anarchy that the Bible warns about. How do we as Christians, and as a church as a whole, confront this kind of challenge?
- 2 Reflect on the story of King Rehoboam and the division of Israel (*1 Kings 12*). What lessons are there for us today?
- 3 What can church leaders and members do to help prevent strife and cliques in a local church? How important is it to stop these issues before they grow and fester? How can we as church members be careful not to fall into the trap that some did in Corinth?
- 4 Study the context of the passage on discord in Proverbs 6:16–19. What do you learn from this to prevent discord in your local church?

Summary: In the Bible we find situations that led to disunity. When God’s people lived in faithful obedience, the dangers of disunity were greatly diminished. Bad decisions from the time of the judges as well as from the reign of Rehoboam opened the door for division. Even in New Testament times, the potential for disunity remained. A proper understanding of God’s Word and the sanctified effort to obey it are the best protection against disunity and schism among us.

Adventists Sang, Priest Cursed

By ELVIS DUMITRU

I am a pastor because my grandfather, a lifelong Orthodox believer, endorsed the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

As my grandfather was growing old, he spoke to my father in their home in Rătești, a small village in Romania. “If you ever want to belong to the only true Christian church, you have to go to the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” said my grandfather, Gherase Dumitru.

Those words planted a seed that led my father, Aurelian, to seek out the Adventist Church and be baptized in Communist-era Romania. As a result, I grew up in an Adventist home, and my brother and I are both Adventist pastors.

But how did my grandfather know about Adventists?

The story goes back to the early 1960s in Rătești, located about 85 miles (135 kilometers) north of Romania’s capital, Bucharest. Only eight or so Adventists lived in the village, and the authorities ordered their arrest amid a crackdown on religion. A driver was called to transport the Adventists to jail by horse and cart.

As the cart shook and swayed on a bumpy dirt road, the prisoners began to sing hymns in the back. The driver listened, surprised at the beautiful words about Jesus and His love. He thought, *How can these Adventists sing with such joy when they are going to jail?*

About a week later, the driver was called to take the village’s Orthodox priest to his church. The cart struck a pothole en route to the church, and the priest angrily unleashed a torrent of blasphemies.

The driver listened in shock. He thought, *Why is the priest cursing his God for a pothole as he goes to church? And why did those Adventists sing such beautiful songs of praise to Jesus as they went to jail?*

The two incidents left a deep impression on the driver, and he determined to learn more about the Adventists. After a while, he was baptized into the Adventist Church. The driver was a good friend of my grandfather’s.

Rătești remains a small village today but has a strong Adventist presence, with about 40 church members.



We often think that people are not interested in what we are doing, but people are always watching. A cart of Adventist prisoners didn’t know that a driver was listening in awe to their songs of praise—and that their faithfulness would shape two generations of Adventists in my family.

ELVIS DUMITRU, 26, is the associate pastor of the Cuza Voda Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bucharest.

“That They All May Be One”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *John 17:1–26, 1 John 5:19, John 13:18–30, John 5:20–23, Mark 9:38–41, Rev. 18:4, 1 John 2:3–6.*

Memory Text: “‘I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me’ ” (*John 17:20, 21, NKJV*).

The Gospel of John provides us with a window into Jesus’ immediate concerns as His betrayal and death loomed on the horizon. In five crucial chapters (*John 13–17*) we receive Jesus’ last words of instruction, culminating with what has sometimes been called His “high-priestly prayer” (*John 17*).

“It is a fitting designation, for our Lord in this prayer consecrates himself for the sacrifice in which he is simultaneously both priest and victim. At the same time it is a prayer of consecration on behalf of those for whom the sacrifice is offered—the disciples who were present in the upper room and those who would subsequently come to faith through their testimony.”—F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 328.

At the core of this prayer is Jesus’ concern for unity among His disciples and those who would later believe in Him. This was a key theme in His prayer: “‘I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them’ ” (*John 17:9, 10, NKJV*).

No meaningful discussion of church unity, of our oneness in Christ, can be complete without careful attention given to this prayer. What did Jesus pray for, whom did He pray for, and what does His prayer mean for us today?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 20.

Jesus Prays for Himself

The high-priestly prayer is divided into three parts. First, Jesus prays for Himself (*John 17:1–5*), then for His disciples (*John 17:6–19*), and finally for those who would later believe in Him (*John 17:20–26*).

Read John 17:1–5. What is the essence of His prayer, and what does it mean for us?

Jesus intercedes first for Himself. In preceding events in the Gospel of John, Jesus had indicated that His hour had not yet come (*John 2:4, 7:30, 8:20*). But now He knows the hour of His sacrifice is here. The moment for the dramatic conclusion of His earthly life has arrived, and He is in need of strength to complete His mission. It is a time for prayer.

Jesus will glorify His Father by doing His will, even if it means He must endure the Cross. His acceptance of the Cross is not some kind of fatalism; rather, it is in fact how He exercises the authority the Father has given Him. He did not die a martyr's death, but willingly glorified His Father by fulfilling the reason for His incarnation: His sacrificial death on the cross for the sins of the world.

What is eternal life according to John 17:3? What does it mean to know God?

First and foremost, Jesus tells us eternal life consists in our personal knowledge of God. This is not salvation by works or by knowledge, but rather it is the experience of knowing the Lord because of what Jesus has done for us at the Cross. This knowledge is mediated through a personal relationship with the Father. Our human tendency is to limit knowledge to facts and details, but here Jesus aims at something deeper and more fulfilling: a personal relationship with God. Jesus' first advent also was for the purpose of guiding humanity in its search for a more meaningful and saving knowledge of God and the unity with each other that such knowledge will lead to.

What is the difference between knowing *about* God and knowing God personally? What experiences have you had that have helped you come to know God?

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

Read John 17:9–19. What is Jesus praying specifically about in regard to His disciples?

Jesus prays next for His disciples, who are in grave danger of losing their faith in Him in the days ahead, when He, Jesus, will no longer be with them in the flesh. Thus, He commits them to the care of His Father.

The prayer of Jesus is for their protection in the world. As such, Jesus does not pray for the world, because He knows it intrinsically is opposed to the will of the Father (*1 John 5:19*). But because the world is the place where the disciples will do their service, Jesus prays that they may be preserved from the evil in the world. Jesus is concerned for the world; indeed, He is the Savior of it. But the spread of the gospel is tied to the witness of those who will go and preach the good news. That is why Jesus needs to intercede for them that the evil one will not defeat them (*Matt. 6:13*).

One disciple, however, has been defeated. Earlier that evening Jesus had mentioned that one of them had decided to betray Him (*John 13:18–30*). Even though Jesus refers to the fact that Scripture had predicted Judas's betrayal (*Ps. 41:9*), Judas was not the victim of fate. During the Last Supper, Jesus appealed to him in a gesture of love and friendship (*John 13:26–30*). "At the Passover supper Jesus proved His divinity by revealing the traitor's purpose. He tenderly included Judas in the ministry to the disciples. But the last appeal of love was unheeded."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 720.

Knowing that envy and jealousies could divide the disciples, as it had done on occasion before, Jesus prays for their unity. " 'Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are' " (*John 17:11, NKJV*). Such unity is beyond human accomplishment. It can be the result and gift of divine grace only. Their unity is grounded in the unity of the Father and Son, and this unity is an indispensable prerequisite for effective service in the future.

Their sanctification, or consecration, in the truth also is indispensable for service. The work of God's grace on the disciples' hearts will transform them. But if they are to witness to God's truth, they themselves must be transformed by that truth.

What does it mean to be "not of the world"? What is it about us, our lives, and how we live that make us "not of this world"?

“For Those Who Will Believe in Me”

After Jesus prayed for His disciples, He broadened His prayer to include “ ‘those who will believe in Me through their word’ ” (*John 17:20, NKJV*).

Read *John 17:20–26*. What was Jesus’ greatest wish for those who would later believe in the gospel message? Why is it so important that this prayer be fulfilled?

As the Father and Son are one, Jesus prayed that future believers also would be one. In a few places in the Gospel of John, Jesus referred to the unity of the Father and Son. They never act independently of each other, but are always united in everything They do (*John 5:20–23*). They share a common love for fallen humanity to the extent that the Father was willing to give His Son for the world, and the Son was willing to give His life for it too (*John 3:16, 10:15*).

The unity Jesus refers to in this prayer is a unity of love and purpose as it is between Father and Son. “ ‘By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Manifesting this unity in love will give public confirmation, both of their relationship with Jesus and with the Father. “The display of their genuine unity ought to provide a compelling witness to the truth of the gospel.”—Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 498. This is how the world will know that Jesus is the Savior. In other words, this unity Jesus prayed for cannot be invisible. How can the world be convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel if it cannot see love and unity among God’s people?

“God is leading out a people to stand in perfect unity upon the platform of eternal truth. . . . God designs that His people should all come into the unity of the faith. The prayer of Christ just prior to His crucifixion was that His disciples might be one, even as He was one with the Father, that the world might believe that the Father had sent Him. This most touching and wonderful prayer reaches down the ages, even to our day; for His words were: ‘Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word.’

“How earnestly should the professed followers of Christ seek to answer this prayer in their lives.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 17.

What are we doing in our lives and churches to help reach the kind of unity presented here? Why is a certain amount of death to self crucial for each of us if we want our church to be united as it should be?

Unity Among Christians

Read Mark 9:38–41 and John 10:16. What does Jesus' response to the apostle John teach us about exclusivism and quick judgments about who is a true follower of Jesus?

Seventh-day Adventists have tended to understand Jesus' prayer in John 17 as directly applying to the unity of their church denomination. We must be united as a church to fulfill our mission to share the three angels' messages to the world. On this point, there is little contention.

But what about unity with other Christians? How are we to relate to them in light of what Jesus prayed?

No question, we believe that God has faithful people in other churches besides our own. Besides, the Bible makes it clear that God has His faithful ones, even in Babylon: “ ‘Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues’ ” (*Rev. 18:4, NKJV*).

At the same time we know that according to the book of Revelation, there is great apostasy among those who profess the name of Christ, and that in the last days many false Christians will unite with each other and with the state in order to bring about the persecution graphically depicted in Revelation 13:1–17. Hence, Adventists always have been very careful about getting involved in calls for unity with other churches, such as seen in the ecumenical movement.

How, then, should we relate to other denominations? Ellen G. White wrote the following in regard to the Seventh-day Adventist Church working together with other Christians, at least on this specific issue: “As the human agent submits his will to the will of God, the Holy Spirit will make the impression upon the hearts of those to whom he ministers. I have been shown that we are not to shun the W.C.T.U. [Woman's Christian Temperance Union] workers. By uniting with them in behalf of total abstinence we do not change our position regarding the observance of the seventh day, and we can show our appreciation of their position regarding the subject of temperance. By opening the door and inviting them to unite with us on the temperance question we secure their help along temperance lines; and they, by uniting with us, will hear new truths which the Holy Spirit is waiting to impress upon hearts.”—*Welfare Ministry*, p. 163.

Though she was dealing with a specific issue at a specific time, she does give principles that we can follow regarding how we relate to other Christians, especially on the question of uniting around a cause.

First, we can work with them on common social interests. Second, if we do unite with them, we must do so in a way that will not compromise our beliefs or practices. Third, we can and should use this “unity” to share with others the precious truths with which we have been blessed.

One Faith Shared in Love

In John 17:3, Jesus said that eternal life is to know God. Read 1 John 2:3–6. What does it mean to know God? How do we demonstrate our knowledge of God in our daily lives?

Generally, while people in society today wish to call themselves law-abiding citizens, these same people often will downplay the biblical obligation to keep the commandments of God. Some even argue that God's grace does away with God's commandments. But that is not the biblical teaching: "Keeping the commandments is not a condition for knowing God but a sign that we know God/Jesus and love Him. Therefore, knowledge of God is not just theoretical knowledge but leads to action." —Ekkehardt Mueller, *The Letters of John* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2009), p. 39. Jesus Himself emphasized: " 'If you love Me, keep My commandments.' " " 'He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me' " (*John 14:15, 21, NKJV*). "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (*1 John 5:2, 3, NKJV*).

Read John 13:34, 35. What new commandment did Jesus give His disciples, and how does this relate to the idea of unity among Jesus' followers?

The command to love one's neighbor was not new in itself; it can be found in the instructions God gave Moses (*Lev. 19:18*). What is new is Jesus' command for His disciples to love one another *as He has loved them*. Jesus' example of self-sacrificial love is the new ethic for the Christian community.

What a wonderful standard has been set before us! Jesus' life had been a practical demonstration of love in action. The whole work of grace is one continual service of love, of self-denying, self-sacrificing effort. We can imagine that Christ's life was an unceasing manifestation of love and self-sacrifice for the good of others. The principle that actuated Christ should actuate His people in all their dealing with one another. What a powerful witness such love would be to the world. And what a powerful force for unity among us such love would provide, as well.

How can we learn to reveal the kind of self-sacrificing love for others that Jesus revealed?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “God’s Law Immutable,” pp. 443–446, in *The Great Controversy*. Read the articles “Denominations, Relations to Other,” pp. 763, 764, and “Roman Catholic Church,” p. 1110, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“Although the Seventh-day Adventist church is a worldwide church with many local churches, Adventists do not claim to be Christ’s universal church. The universal church is broader than any denomination. It is visible and invisible insofar as it consists of those who believe in Jesus and follow him. This particular theological issue is heightened if we take into consideration apostasy among Christians, addressed poignantly in the Book of Revelation. The pure church of Revelation 12 is contrasted with the ‘harlot’ of Revelation 17, Babylon the great city, which in turn is contrasted with the bride of the Lamb, the holy city or the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 and 22. In the first century, the universal church may have been quite visible[;] it is much more difficult and complex to see it, for instance, during the Medieval Ages.

“Therefore, Adventists do not limit the concept of God’s true church to their own denomination, nor do they automatically extend it to other Christian churches. God’s true church consists of those individuals who truly believe in [H]im. God knows them. Adventists, on the other hand, claim that they are God’s special visible end-time remnant of Revelation 12:17 and chapters 12–14. This remnant has a local as well as a universal character (*Rev. 2:24 and 12:17*).”—Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church* (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2013), p. 37.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Has your local church worked with other Christians on certain issues? How can we work with them, when appropriate, without compromising truth?
- 2 What are the implications of the statement below found in *The Great Controversy*? How can we make this real among us? “If God’s professed people would receive the light as it shines upon them from His word, they would reach that unity for which Christ prayed, that which the apostle describes, ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ ‘There is,’ he says, ‘one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism.’ Ephesians 4:3–5.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 379.

Summary: Jesus’ high-priestly prayer in John 17 is a reminder that Jesus still is concerned about church unity today. His prayer should be our prayer, and we should seek ways to solidify our faith in God’s Word. Love for one another also should characterize our relationships to everyone, including other Christians, whatever our theological differences may be.

God Fills a Hole

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Frank Cantrill, a retired Seventh-day Adventist pastor in Australia, was shocked when doctors diagnosed him with skin cancer. But an even bigger surprise came two weeks later when a gaping hole in his head healed in what stunned doctors called a miracle.

Frank was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma, a kind of skin cancer, on his head in 2014. "It was a shock to be told that if the new drugs didn't work, I would not have too many chances," said Frank, 72.

A pastor anointed him, and people began to pray for him. Frank underwent a series of operations, radiation treatments, and immunotherapies with his wife, Marlene, at his side.

Complications arose after an operation where doctors removed a large melanoma from the back of Frank's head, leaving part of his skull exposed. Nurses dressed the wound, waiting for the skin to grow back over the skull, and later his wife took over.

The wound healed well at first, but then the skin just stopped growing.

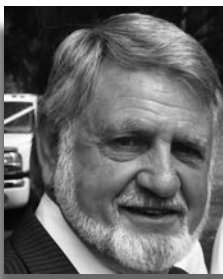
One day, the color of the exposed skull changed from white to yellow. A plastic surgeon gave Frank the disturbing diagnosis that his skull had died. The surgeon called in a leading plastic surgeon for consultations, and the two decided to perform a major surgery with the assistance of a neurosurgeon. The complex operation would take 8 to 10 hours and require the doctors to replace Frank's skull with an artificial one.

"The news was a shock to us," Marlene said in an e-mail to friends.

A few days later, as Marlene was changing the dressing on Frank's head, a chunk of discolored skull came off with the dressing and rested in her hand. "I nearly collapsed with shock!" Marlene said.

Underneath the chunk of skull that had come off, she could see that Frank's flesh had been growing across the skull and had covered the gaping hole.

Over the next two days, Frank visited three medical specialists to find out what was happening. He learned that the human skull has three layers, and his flesh had been growing underneath the first layer, eventually forcing the top layer of the skull to pop off.



The medical specialists declared it a miracle. "They said, 'Who is looking after you?'" Marlene said.

FRANK, pictured left, and Marlene Cantrill pointed to God as the Great Physician. The operation was canceled, and Frank was sent back home.

"God knows what is happening, and He has perfect timing," Marlene said. "All we can say is 'Praise the Lord!'"

The Key *to* Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 1:3–14; Gal. 4:7; Eph. 2:11–22; 4:1–6, 11; Matt. 20:25–28; Eph. 5:15–6:9.*

Memory Text: “Having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him” (*Ephesians 1:9, 10, NKJV*).

Ephesus was a major center of commerce and influence in Asia Minor. The church there, in Ephesus, was made up of Jews, Gentiles, and people in all social walks of life. Such a diverse membership might have been as prone to conflicts as the world in which they lived; that is, if it weren't for Christ and the unity they had in Him as members of the body of Christ. Thus, Paul's concern for unity among Christ's followers is the central theme of his Epistle to the Ephesians.

Paul's concept of unity has two dimensions: unity in the church, where Jews and Gentiles are brought together in one body—Christ; and unity in the universe, in which all things in heaven and earth find their ultimate oneness in Christ.

The source of this unity is Christ. Paul's expression “in Christ” or “with Christ” is used numerous times in this epistle in order to show what God has accomplished for us and for the universe through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's ultimate purpose in the plan of salvation is to reunify all things through Christ. This unity will be made fully manifest only at the end of the age.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 27.*

Blessings in Christ

Read Ephesians 1:3–14. What, according to Paul here, have we been given in Christ?

The followers of Jesus have much to praise God for. In Christ, God has chosen to adopt us as sons and daughters and to represent Him to the world. Paul uses many images to describe our new relationship to God in Christ. Of these images, the image of adoption addresses this lesson's theme of oneness. In Christ, we have been adopted, and we belong to the family of God. This family image also is a reference to God's covenant with the children of Israel. In the context of Paul's epistle, Gentiles who accept Jesus as the Messiah also are children of God, heirs of the promises made to Israel (*Rom. 8:17, Gal. 4:7*). The benefit of this relationship with Christ, to be in Christ, is fundamental to all Christian unity. This passage also tells us that it has been God's desire all along to reunite all humanity in Christ. And, in God's family, we are all children of God, equally loved and cherished.

Some get confused when, in this passage, we read about predestination (*Eph. 1:5, 11*). The promise that God has chosen us to be saved seems to imply also that God has chosen some to be lost. But that's not the biblical teaching. Rather, God prepared the plan of salvation before the foundation of the world in order that everyone might be saved. " 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life' " (*John 3:16, NKJV; see also 1 Tim. 2:6, 2 Pet. 3:9*). God knows beforehand who will accept His offer of salvation, but that is not the same as predetermining one's decision. Salvation is offered to all humanity because of what Christ has done for us. The question is: *How do we respond to this offer?* God does not use coercion to save anyone.

"In the council of heaven, provision was made that men, though transgressors, should not perish in their disobedience, but, through faith in Christ as their substitute and surety, might become the elect of God, predestinated unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself according to the good pleasure of His will. God wills that all men should be saved; for ample provision has been made, in giving His only-begotten Son to pay man's ransom. Those who perish will perish because they refuse to be adopted as children of God through Christ Jesus."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1114.

Breaking Down the Wall

Some of the deepest divisions among people are caused by differences of race, ethnicity, and religion. In many societies, identity cards indicate the ethnicity or religion one belongs to, and these distinctions often are connected with privileges or restrictions that people have to live with on a daily basis. When wars or conflicts arise, these markers of identity and differences often become catalysts for repression and violence.

In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul indicates a better way for the Christian community. How does our unity in Christ affect our differences? What was broken down by Jesus’ death on the cross?

Paul invites the Ephesians to remember what their lives were like before they received the grace of God in Christ. Ethnic, cultural, and religious differences created animosity and conflicts between people groups. But the good news is that, in Christ, we are all one people with a common Savior and Lord. We all belong to the people of God. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (*Eph. 2:13, NKJV*).

The ancient temple in Jerusalem had a wall of separation to distinguish the sections of the temple accessible only to ethnic Jews. This wall had an inscription that forbade foreigners to go any further, under pain of death. It is this regulation that Paul was accused of transgressing when he entered the temple after his missionary journeys. When Paul was arrested, he was charged with bringing into the Jewish section of the temple an Ephesian named Trophimus (*Acts 21:29*). In this epistle Paul argues that Christ “is our peace, who has made both [ethnic groups] one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation” (*Eph. 2:14, NKJV*).

In Christ, believers are descendants of Abraham and receive the circumcision of the heart. The physical circumcision that God gave to Abraham pointed to the spiritual circumcision that believers would receive in Christ (*see Deut. 10:16*). “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (*Col. 2:11, NKJV*).

Read again Ephesians 2:11–22. In what ways do we see in our own church the reality of what Paul has written here? What challenges remain?

Unity in One Body

Paul is practical in his inspired words to the Ephesians. The unity that exists between Jews and Gentiles, between people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, is not a myth or simply a theoretical construct; it is a reality that demands us “to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called” (*Eph. 4:1, NKJV*).

According to Ephesians 4:1–3, in what way are Christians to walk worthy of their calling in Christ?

The practical outcome of these virtues and graces in the Christian’s life helps “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Eph. 4:3, NKJV*). All these attributes are rooted in love (*1 Cor. 13:1–7*). The active practice of love preserves relationships among brothers and sisters and promotes peace and unity in the Christian community and beyond. Unity in the church manifests God’s love in unique ways that others can witness. The church is called to be such a witness, especially in a time of strife, divisions, and wars.

Read Ephesians 4:4–6. What is one crucial theme in these three verses?

In the first verses of this chapter, Paul expresses his deep interest in the unity of the church. He begins with an exhortation to unity (*Eph. 4:1–3*) and follows with a list of the seven elements that unite believers (*Eph. 4:4–6*). Unity is simultaneously something that believers already possess (*Eph. 4:4–6*), something that must be constantly worked on and maintained (*Eph. 4:1–3*), and something that is the future goal toward which we strive (*Eph. 4:13*).

“The apostle exhorts his brethren to manifest in their lives the power of the truth which he had presented to them. By meekness and gentleness, forbearance and love, they were to exemplify the character of Christ and the blessings of His salvation. There is but one body, and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith. As members of the body of Christ all believers are animated by the same spirit and the same hope. Divisions in the church dishonor the religion of Christ before the world and give occasion to the enemies of truth to justify their course. Paul’s instructions were not written alone for the church in his day. God designed that they should be sent down to us. What are we doing to preserve unity in the bonds of peace?”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 239.

What choices can you make right now in order to be sure that you are walking “worthy of the calling with which you were called”?

Church Leaders and Unity

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (*Eph. 4:7, NKJV*). While salvation is a gift given to all people who will receive it, some spiritual gifts are given to certain people for a special purpose.

Read Ephesians 4:11. What gifts of leadership does God give to the church?

According to Ephesians 4:12, what is God’s purpose in giving special gifts of leadership to the church? How do these gifts relate to each other?

All Christians are in a sense ministers and servants of God and the gospel. Christ’s commission in Matthew 28:19, 20 is given to all Christians to go, to make disciples of all nations, to baptize, and to teach. The work of ministry is not given only to a privileged few, such as pastors and/or evangelists, but to all who bear the name of Christ. No one can claim exemption from the work of spreading the gospel, and no church leader can claim to have an exclusive ministry. The spiritual gifts of leadership are specifically to edify the church. Church leaders are needed to foster, promote, and encourage unity.

Paul’s list of gifts of leadership tells us that these roles also are for equipping God’s people to reach the lost. It is the responsibility of some specially called people within the church to help others fulfill their ministry and service for Christ, and to edify the body of Christ, “till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13, NKJV*). The example of Jesus’ style of leadership must guide how we do ministry. Jesus came to serve others and not to be served (*Matt. 20:25–28*); we must go and do likewise.

There is a strong tendency among humans to be independent and not accountable to anyone. Western society, in particular, is plagued by this inclination. Paul reminds us, however, that no Christian is alone in this world and that we form a community of faith with spiritual leaders to help encourage one another in our common journey. We are, all together, part of the body of Christ.

What spiritual gifts do you have, and how are you using them for the unity of your local church?

Human Relationships in Christ

Christianity is a religion of relationships: relationship with God and with one another. It makes no sense to claim to have a deep relationship with God without that relationship having an impact on the relationships one has with other people. Christianity cannot be lived in a vacuum. The principles of unity Paul discusses in his Epistle to the Ephesians also are applicable to how we relate to others.

Read Ephesians 5:15–21. What is Paul saying to us in verse 21? What is the relationship between submission and unity?

Paul's exhortation to be submitted to one another is connected with the phrase being "filled with the Spirit" in Ephesians 5:18. One of the expressions of the infilling of the Spirit is submission to one another. This refers to the proper attitude of humility and thoughtfulness that we should have toward people. Of course, this is not a natural attribute of most personalities, but is the result of the Spirit's living in our hearts. It is a gift of the same Spirit, who is the bond of unity in Christ. Viewed from this perspective, submission is an inner quality that expresses our reverence for Christ and His sacrifice for us.

Read Ephesians 5:22–6:9. What impact on our human relationships does this quality of mutual submission have in the home and workplace of a believer in Christ?

To some extent, unity in the church depends upon unity in the home. Paul emphasized that the unity, love, and respect that should exist between husband and wife should exemplify the love of Christ toward the church, a self-sacrificing love. Thus, Christlike respect in the home as well as in the church is required of husbands and wives and church members. This Christlike attribute also is to be exemplified in relationships between children and parents and between employees and employers (bondservants and masters). The kind of harmony and peacefulness that should pervade our homes should pervade our church life, as well.

What principles can you take from the verses for today that can help you better understand how you should act (depending upon your situation) toward a member of your family or a coworker?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Spirit of Unity,” pp. 179–188, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9.

“Christ recognized no distinction of nationality or rank or creed. The scribes and Pharisees desired to make a local and a national benefit of all the gifts of heaven and to exclude the rest of God’s family in the world. But Christ came to break down every wall of partition. He came to show that His gift of mercy and love is as unconfined as the air, the light, or the showers of rain that refresh the earth.

“The life of Christ established a religion in which there is no caste, a religion by which Jew and Gentile, free and bond, are linked in a common brotherhood, equal before God. No question of policy influenced His movements. He made no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. That which appealed to His heart was a soul thirsting for the waters of life.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, pp. 190, 191.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Reflect on this statement: “In the fourth chapter of Ephesians the plan of God is so plainly and simply revealed that all His children may lay hold upon the truth. Here the means which He has appointed to keep unity in His church, that its members may reveal to the world a healthy religious experience, is plainly declared.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1117. What do you see in Ephesians 4 that points to the unity of the church? What can we do to help ensure that unity?
- ❷ So central to the question of unity is the need for humility and submission. Without these traits, how could any unity exist in the church? If we are proud, sure of our views and positions, and unwilling to listen to others, we have no chance of unity. How can we learn this humility and submission?
- ❸ How can we have unity even when we don’t always agree on everything?

Summary: In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul gives many counsels regarding what it means for Christians to be “in Christ.” Salvation in Jesus transforms our lives in practical ways. All our human relationships, including relations between brothers and sisters in the church, are transformed by the power of Christ in our lives. And this transformation is crucial in order for us to have unity.

Female Bomber Baptized

By PHILIP BAPTISTE

Amina is serving a five-year prison sentence in East-Central Africa after being arrested as she headed to India to blow up a large facility.

But persistent visits by a Seventh-day Adventist pastor resulted in her discarding her fundamentalist understanding of Islam and being baptized into the Adventist Church.

“I just praise God for the Adventist pastor who consistently prayed for me and visited me in my time of great need,” Amina said.

For her safety, Adventist Mission is not disclosing Amina’s full name or her location.

Amina was in solitary confinement, in an isolated cell, because of the nature of her crime when the pastor first came to visit. She had plotted the attack after being taught by fundamental Muslim leaders that she would attain righteousness and live in paradise if she eliminated evil.

Initially, Amina rebuffed the pastor, whose counseling visits were arranged by the prison warden. But when the pastor kept returning, she relented because the counseling sessions would be held outside her cell and she missed the sunshine.

Amina refused the pastor’s first request to pray for her. She told the pastor that he should pray for himself instead. The pastor prayed for her anyway, and he kept on praying.

After a few counseling sessions together, the pastor had to take care of business elsewhere for a few weeks. Amina began to miss the visits. When the pastor did not return as soon as she expected, she started reading a Bible that he had left in her cell.

A few months later, the Adventist church organized a camp meeting at the prison, and Amina was invited to attend. Amina agreed to go for the sake of socializing with the other inmates. To her surprise, when the pastor made an altar call, she went up to surrender her life to Jesus. Not long after, she was baptized.

Amina said she does not understand how, during the counseling sessions, she lost interest in her former faith. She believes that God used her imprisonment to reveal His truth to her, and now she is anxious to reach her friends.

“When I get out of prison, I will spend all that I have to reach them,” she said.



PHILIP BAPTISTE is special assistant to the president of the East-Central Africa Division.

The Experience of Unity in the Early Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 1:12–14, Acts 2:5–13, Rev. 14:12, Acts 2:42–47, Acts 4:32–37, Acts 5:1–11, 2 Cor. 9:8–15.*

Memory Text: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*).

Church unity is the result of a shared spiritual experience in Jesus, who is the truth. “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (*John 14:6*). Solid bonds of fellowship are forged in a common spiritual journey and experience. Early Adventists had such an experience in the Millerite movement. Their common experience in 1844 tied their hearts together as they sought to find an explanation for their disappointment. This experience gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the truth about the pre-Advent judgment and all that it entails.

The experience of Jesus’ disciples after His ascension to heaven is a testimony to the power of God’s Word, prayer, and common fellowship in creating unity and harmony among believers of widely different backgrounds. That same experience still is possible today.

“I would insist that fellowship is a particularly important element in corporate worship. . . . There is no substitute to the Christian for the realization of the spiritual bond which unites him with other believers and with the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Jesus Christ first brings a soul to Himself, but then He always unites that soul to other believers in His body, the church.”—Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 91.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 3.

Days of Preparation

In the last hours spent with the disciples before His death, Jesus promised that He would not leave them alone. Another Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would be sent to accompany them in their ministry. The Spirit would help them remember many things Jesus had said and done (*John 14:26*), and would guide them in discovering more truths (*John 16:13*). On the day of His ascension Jesus renewed this promise. “ ‘You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’ . . . ‘You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you’ ” (*Acts 1:5, 8, NKJV*). The Holy Spirit’s power will be given to enable the disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth (*Acts 1:8*).

Read Acts 1:12–14. What did the disciples do during this period of ten days?

We can imagine these ten days as a period of intense spiritual preparation, a kind of retreat during which these disciples share together their memories of Jesus, His deeds, His teachings, and His miracles. They were of “one accord in prayer and supplication” (*Acts 1:14*).

“As the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief. As they called to remembrance the words that Christ had spoken to them before His death they understood more fully their meaning. Truths which had passed from their memory were again brought to their minds, and these they repeated to one another. They reproached themselves for their misapprehension of the Saviour. Like a procession, scene after scene of His wonderful life passed before them. As they meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness of Christ’s character. Oh, if they could but have the past three years to live over, they thought, how differently they would act! If they could only see the Master again, how earnestly they would strive to show Him how deeply they loved Him, and how sincerely they sorrowed for having ever grieved Him by a word or an act of unbelief! But they were comforted by the thought that they were forgiven. And they determined that, so far as possible, they would atone for their unbelief by bravely confessing Him before the world. . . . Putting away all differences, all desire for the supremacy, they came close together in Christian fellowship.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 36, 37.

What things do you wish you could do over in regard to your faith? What can you learn from your regrets about the past that can help you make a better future?

From Babel to Pentecost

The days of spiritual preparation, following Jesus' ascension, culminated in the events of Pentecost. The first verse tells us that on that day, just before the Holy Spirit was poured upon the disciples, they were all together, of "one accord," in one place (*Acts 2:1*).

In the Old Testament, Pentecost was the second of three major feasts that every male Israelite was obligated to attend. It was held fifty days (in Greek, *pentekoste*, fiftieth day) after Passover. During that feast the Hebrews presented to God the firstfruits of their summer harvest as an offering of thanksgiving.

It is likely, also, that by the time of Jesus the Feast of Pentecost included a celebration of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, as well (*Exod. 19:1*). Thus, we see here the continued importance of God's law as part and parcel of the Christian message regarding Jesus, whose death offers everyone who repents forgiveness for their violation of God's law. No wonder one of the crucial texts regarding the last days deals with both the law and the gospel: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (*Rev. 14:12, NKJV*).

Also, as with Mount Sinai, when Moses received the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 19:16–25, Heb. 12:18*), numerous extraordinary phenomena occurred at this Pentecost. "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (*Acts 2:2–4, NKJV*).

Read Acts 2:5–13. What is the significance of this amazing event?

Pentecost was to be a joyous feast, a feast of thanksgiving to the Lord for His bounties. Here, perhaps, is the reason for the false accusation of drunkenness (*Acts 2:13–15*). God's power especially is seen in the miracle of speaking and hearing in diverse tongues. Jews from all over the Roman Empire who came to Jerusalem for this feast heard the message of Jesus, the Messiah, in their own languages.

In a unique way, Pentecost helps undo the dispersion of the original human family and the formation of ethnic groups, which began in earnest at the Tower of Babel. The miracle of grace begins the reunifying of the human family. The unity of God's church on a global scale testifies to the nature of His kingdom as restoring what was lost at Babel.

Unity of Fellowship

In response to Peter's sermon and appeal for repentance and salvation, about three thousand people made a decision to accept Jesus as the Messiah and the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel. God was at work in the hearts of all these people. Many had heard about Jesus from far away and may have traveled to Jerusalem with the hope of seeing Him. Some may have seen Jesus and heard His messages of God's salvation but had not made a commitment to become a follower. At Pentecost, God miraculously intervened in the lives of the disciples and used them as witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. Now they know that, in Jesus' name, people can have the forgiveness of their sins (*Acts 2:38*).

Read Acts 2:42–47. What activities did these early followers of Jesus do as a community of believers? What created this amazing unity of fellowship?

It is remarkable that the first activity this community of new believers engaged in was learning the apostles' teaching. Bible instruction is an important way to facilitate the spiritual growth of new believers. Jesus had given the commission to His disciples to teach them " 'all things that I have commanded you' " (*Matt. 28:20, NKJV*). This new community spent time learning from the apostles all about Jesus. They likely heard about Jesus' life and ministry; His teachings, parables, and sermons; and His miracles, all explained as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures in the writings of the prophets.

They also spent time in prayer and the breaking of bread. It is unclear whether the breaking of bread is a direct allusion to the Lord's Supper or simply a reference to sharing meals together, as Acts 2:46 seems to imply. The mention of fellowship certainly infers that this new community spent time together, often and regularly, both in the temple in Jerusalem, which still served as the center of their devotions and worship, and in their private homes. They shared an intimate life. They ate and prayed together. Prayer is a vital element of a community of faith, and it is essential to spiritual growth. This new community spent time in worship. We are told that these activities were done "steadfastly."

This steadfast fellowship generated good relationships with others in Jerusalem. The new believers are described as "having favor with all the people" (*Acts 2:47, NKJV*). No doubt the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives made a powerful impression on those around them and served as a powerful witness to the truth of Jesus as the Messiah.

What can your local church learn from the example set here in regard to unity, fellowship, and witness?

Generosity and Greed

Luke tells us that one of the natural outgrowths of the fellowship experienced by Jesus' followers soon after Pentecost was their mutual support of each other. "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (*Acts 2:44, 45, NKJV*).

This sharing of common goods is not a requirement of the community, but a voluntary outgrowth of their love for each other in the fellowship they experience. It also is a concrete expression of their unity. This mutual support continued for some time, and we are given more details about it in Acts 4 and 5. It also is a theme that we find in other places in the New Testament, as we will see next.

It is in this context that Barnabas is introduced for the first time. He appears to be a wealthy person who owned land. Having sold his property for the benefit of the community, he brought the money to the apostles (*Acts 4:36, 37*). Barnabas is portrayed as an example to follow.

Read Acts 4:32–37 and 5:1–11. Compare the behaviors and attitudes of Barnabas with those of Ananias and Sapphira. What went wrong with this couple?

Besides their sin of outright lying to the Holy Spirit, these people also displayed greed and covetousness. Perhaps no sin can destroy fellowship and brotherly love faster than selfishness and greed. If Barnabas serves as a positive example of the early church's spirit of fellowship, Ananias and Sapphira are the opposite. Luke is honest in sharing this story about less virtuous people in the community.

In the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:1–17*), the last commandment, about covetousness, is unlike the others. While other commandments speak of actions that visibly transgress God's will for humanity, the last commandment is about what is hidden in the heart. The sin of covetousness is not an action; rather, it is a thought process. Covetousness, and its companion selfishness, is not a visible sin but a condition of sinful human nature. It becomes visible only when manifested in selfish actions, such as what was seen here with Ananias and Sapphira. In a sense the last commandment reveals the root of the evil manifested in the actions condemned by all the other commandments. Their covetousness opened them to Satan's influence, which led them to lie to God; this is not unlike what Judas's covetousness led him to do, as well.

What are ways in which we can seek to uproot covetousness from our own lives? Why is praise and thanksgiving for what we have a powerful antidote to this evil?

Remember the Poor

The sharing of one's resources was often a tangible expression of unity in the early church. The generosity described in the early chapters of the book of Acts continues later with Paul's inviting the churches he has established in Macedonia and Achaia to make a contribution for the poor in Jerusalem (*see Acts 11:27–30, Gal. 2:10, Rom. 15:26, and 1 Cor. 16:1–4*). That gift becomes a tangible expression of the fact that churches, consisting mainly of Gentile believers, care and love their brothers and sisters of Jewish heritage in Jerusalem. In spite of cultural and ethnic differences, they form one body in Christ and cherish together the same gospel. This sharing with those in need not only reveals the unity that already existed in the church but also strengthens that unity.

Read 2 Corinthians 9:8–15. What does Paul say will be the results of the generosity revealed by the church at Corinth?

The experience of unity in the early church shows us what can still be done today. Unity, however, did not happen without intentional commitment on the part of all believers. The leaders of the early community saw it as their ministry to foster unity in Christ. As love between husband and wife and children is a commitment that must be intentionally fostered every day, so is unity among believers. The unity we have in Christ is both encouraged and made visible in a number of ways.

The obvious elements that fostered this unity in the early church were prayer, worship, fellowship, a common vision, and the study of God's Word. Not only did they understand their mission to preach the gospel to all nations, but they also realized that they had a responsibility of love and care toward each other. Their unity manifested itself in their generosity and mutual support within their own local fellowships, and more broadly, between church communities, even if long distances separated them.

"Their benevolence testified that they had not received the grace of God in vain. What could produce such liberality but the sanctification of the Spirit? In the eyes of believers and unbelievers it was a miracle of grace."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 344.

In what ways have you and your church experienced the benefits of generosity toward others? That is, what blessings come to those who give to others?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Pentecost,” pp. 35–46, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“This liberality on the part of the believers [in Acts 2:44, 45 and 4:32–35] was the result of the outpouring of the Spirit. The converts to the gospel were ‘of one heart and of one soul.’ One common interest controlled them—the success of the mission entrusted to them; and covetousness had no place in their lives. Their love for their brethren and the cause they had espoused was greater than their love of money and possessions. Their works testified that they accounted the souls of men of higher value than earthly wealth.

“Thus it will ever be when the Spirit of God takes possession of the life. Those whose hearts are filled with the love of Christ will follow the example of Him who for our sake became poor, that through His poverty we might be made rich. Money, time, influence—all the gifts they have received from God’s hand, they will value only as a means of advancing the work of the gospel. Thus it was in the early church; and when in the church of today it is seen that by the power of the Spirit the members have taken their affections from the things of the world, and that they are willing to make sacrifices in order that their fellow men may hear the gospel, the truths proclaimed will have a powerful influence upon the hearers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 70, 71.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Read over the factors from this week’s lesson that helped create the unity that the early church had experienced. How can we, as a church today, do similar things? That is, what might we be lacking in contrast to what was taking place among those believers at that time?
- ❷ How is the example of these early New Testament churches giving a generous offering to help the poor in Jerusalem an example of what we should do today? How about other social issues? How can local churches be involved in their communities in order to alleviate poverty and supply other basic needs?
- ❸ What are some lessons we can take away from the sad story of Ananias and Sapphira? What is the importance of the phrase found in Acts 5:5 and 5:11 about the “great fear” that came upon the church in regard to these two deaths?

Summary: The early church experienced rapid growth because Jesus’ disciples intentionally prepared themselves for the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit. Their fellowship and common faith were the means used by the Holy Spirit to prepare their hearts for Pentecost. After Pentecost the Holy Spirit continued to transform this new community, as is manifested in their generosity toward each other and the rapid growth of the church.

From Rocker to Doctor

By VYACHESLAV KOSHKODAN

At the age of 16, I was a rocker who listened to Nirvana and Metallica, had long hair, and wore torn clothing. I spent my nights at a dance hall, drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana in my small hometown in the former Soviet republic of Moldova.

Then a Seventh-day Adventist church member took an interest in me. He didn't condemn me, but instead spoke about his love for Jesus. He often asked me, "Have you read the Bible?"

After a while, I began to wonder why this guy wanted me to read the Bible. One evening I took a Bible with me to the dance hall and began to read. It was like a fairy tale to me, and I didn't take it seriously. But I kept reading, and something strange happened. My life began to change. Things that I once liked were no longer exciting to me. One night I looked around the dance floor and thought, *What are you doing here?* I went home and never returned.

At home, I continued reading the Bible. I asked the church member many questions, and I began to keep the Sabbath.

Soon I enrolled in the university to study medicine in Moldova's capital, Chişinău. We had classes six days a week, Monday through Saturday, but I told the dean that I couldn't study on Saturday. He replied that I should change my major.

At home, I fell on my knees and prayed, "God, if You want me to become a doctor, help me at school." As I prayed, the idea came to me to speak directly to the teacher who taught the Saturday classes. I told him about my beliefs, and he gave permission for me to make up my schoolwork on another day.

When I graduated six years later, my classmates looked at me with respect. They said, "You came to classes only five days a week, but you have better marks than we do. How is that possible?"

I told them, "I am learning from God, and He is my teacher." But really, God is more than my teacher. He has made me into a new person.



Today, I'm 33 and the father of three. In addition to being a physician, I'm a pastor and the health director for the Adventist Church in Moldova.

Anything is possible with Jesus. If Jesus could change me, He can change anyone.

Part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in fourth quarter 2017 helped turn a Soviet-era health resort into a Pathfinder camp and conference center in Moldova. Thank you for your mission offerings.

Images of Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Pet. 2:9; Exod. 19:5, 6; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 1 Cor. 12:12–26; John 10:1–11; Psalm 23.*

Memory Text: “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ” (*1 Corinthians 12:12, NKJV*).

As anyone who has studied the Bible knows, it is filled with images and symbols that point to realities greater than those images and symbols themselves. For instance, the essence of the whole biblical sacrificial system is, in a sense, symbolic of the much greater reality: Jesus and the entire plan of salvation.

Many other kinds of images are used in the Bible, and sometimes from the most basic elements, too—such as water, fire, wind. Depending upon the context, these are images for spiritual and theological truths. For example, when Jesus said, “ ‘The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit’ ” (*John 3:8, NIV*), the wind was used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit.

The Bible uses a number of images to describe the kind of unity we find in the church, the unity that God calls it to manifest before the world. Each individual image is not complete in and of itself. Instead, as a whole, these images reveal many things about church unity, such as the church's relationship to God, the members' relationships to one another, and the church's relationship to the community as a whole.

This week's lesson will look at some of the images and what they reveal to us about unity in Christ.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 10.

The People of God

Read 1 Peter 2:9; Exodus 19:5, 6; Deuteronomy 4:20; and Deuteronomy 7:6. What do these verses say about the special status of the people of God?

The church is about people, but not any kind of people. The church is the people of God, the people who belong to God, who claim God as their Father and Savior, and who have been redeemed by Christ and who obey Him. This image underscores the concept that God has had a people on earth since the introduction of the plan of salvation and that there is continuity between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New. From the time of Adam, the patriarchs before and after the Flood, and Abraham, God has made a covenant with His people to be representatives of His love, mercy, and justice to the world.

God's people are called a "chosen generation," a "royal priesthood," and a "holy nation." These terms indicate that they are set aside for a special purpose: to "proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9, *NKJV*). This also is an echo of a description of God's gracious character, as described in Exodus 34:6, 7. "God acquired the church as His own special possession in order that its members might reflect His precious traits of character in their own lives and proclaim His goodness and mercy to all men."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 562.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6–8. What prompted God to select the descendants of Abraham as His people? How is this still applicable today?

Perhaps we could ask ourselves, What country today deserves the label of "holy nation" (another image of the church)? None. All nations and ethnic groups are composed of people who do not deserve God's love and grace. And though the Bible calls us to be a holy people, Scripture also teaches that the selection and establishment of Israel was based entirely on His love and not on any merits that human beings could bring to Him. The formation of God's people is an act of loving creation and—despite sin and apostasy on a national scale—God kept His promise to Abraham that through his seed, Christ, He would save His people. Just as the election of God's people was an act of His grace, so is their salvation. This theme reminds us of our common roots in the unmerited grace of God.

Why must we always keep before us the sacred truth that our salvation rests upon what Christ has done for us and not upon what we can ever do for ourselves, even if we are "the people of God"?

The Household of God

Another image of the people of God in the New Testament is the house or household of God. It is a metaphor of stones and buildings that highlights the intricate and interdependent nature of human relationships in the church. Peter refers to Christians as “living stones” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NKJV*). This metaphor contains a quality of permanency and solidity.

Read Ephesians 2:19–22. What key ideas does Paul emphasize in this passage? What does this image tell us about unity in the church?

In this passage, Paul combines two images of the church: one inert, a house or building; the other alive, a household of people.

A stone is not very valuable by itself, but when it is bonded with other stones, it becomes a structure that can withstand the storms of life. No Christian can be a stone alone, but must be associated with others in the fellowship of the household of God. For an edifice to be solid, it must rest on a strong foundation. Jesus Christ is this foundation, and the “cornerstone” of the house of God (*see also 1 Cor. 3:11*). The church also would cease to exist if it did not make Christ the cornerstone of its activities. The church is really about Jesus Christ: His life, death, resurrection, and return. The church forms a community of believers united to share the good news about Jesus to the world. The church’s agenda is Jesus: who He is, what He has done for us and does in us, and what He offers to anyone who will accept Him as Lord and Savior.

The image of a household also is very meaningful. This one rests on the relationships people have among themselves. It is a familiar image of father and mother, brothers and sisters. Ties between family members can be strong, and the accompanying loyalties often transcend all other outside ties. Loyalty is a big part of unity, for how could there be any kind of unity without loyalty, as well?

How does this image relate to the church? Church members also are part of one big family. We are linked, not only because we belong to the human family through our common ancestor Adam, but also because we are related to Jesus, the Second Adam, through our common “new birth” experience. Thus, we become united with each other, not just because of the doctrinal truths that we hold in common, but also in the experience of being converted souls who have a new life in Jesus.

Sadly, not everyone has had a great experience with his or her own family. Hence, that image might not mean much to them. How, though, can we as a church become the family that these people never had?

The Temple of the Holy Spirit

Another building imagery Paul uses is that of the temple of God or of the Holy Spirit. It is the image of a costly and valuable building. Along with 1 Corinthians 6:19, where the image refers to one's personal body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17 uses the image to refer to the most holy and precious edifice of the ancient Near East, God's temple.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17. What does it mean that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit? What is Paul warning about in verse 17?

Obviously, Paul does not, in referring to the church, have in mind a physical temple or place of residence for God. The Greek of the New Testament makes a distinction between a “you” singular, in order to refer to one person, and a “you” plural, in order to refer to many people. In this case it is the latter. This metaphor refers to a corporate entity: together the Christians in Corinth form the temple of the Holy Spirit, and in a spiritual sense God resides among them.

For Paul, God resides within the Christian fellowship; hence, his warning that anyone who attempts to destroy this fellowship will suffer the consequences of the judgment. The unity of believers is at the core of this fellowship and of God's presence in this temple. Though this text is often used in the sense of taking care of one's physical body (which is, of course, what Christians are supposed to do anyway), that's not the specific point that Paul was making here. His message was, instead, a warning about those who would destroy the unity of the church.

Earlier in the chapter, Paul referred to what he considers as challenges to unity: “for where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you” (1 Cor. 3:3, *NKJV*). These attitudes and behaviors are real threats to Christian unity and cause the withdrawal of God's presence from His temple. In other words, conflicts in the church can destroy God's temple. Thus, he wants members to put away the attitudes and behaviors that do threaten its unity.

When conflicts erupt in the church, Paul's advice to the Corinthians is still applicable today: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10, *NKJV*).

Envy, strife, and division—these are not just problems the church faced in Paul's day. We face them today, as well. What role does each one of us have in seeking to work through these problems in ways that will not threaten our unity?

The Body of Christ

Perhaps the best-known image of the church and one that speaks the strongest about the unity of its varied parts is the body of Christ. “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Cor. 12:12, 27, NKJV).

Just as a body is a single unit that is made up of many different parts, each with its different function and responsibility, this is the church as the body of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–26. How does this image of one body with many parts apply to your local congregation? How does it apply to a worldwide organization like the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 conveys the profound reality that authentic Christian unity is not just *in* diversity, and certainly not *despite* diversity, but rather *through diversity*. We should not be surprised that it is the Holy Spirit who is the source of these expressions of diversity. Just as the human body is both incredibly unified and amazingly diverse, so ideally is the body of Christ, which through this diversity expresses the completeness and richness of the body of Christ.

This image speaks directly to us as a church. In the past few decades, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown by leaps and bounds. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is composed of people from almost every conceivable background, culture, and environment. Our ethnic, racial, cultural, educational, and age differences must not be permitted to divide us in Christ. If anything, this diversity should be molded by the Holy Spirit as a force for unity, revealing the truth that despite these differences, we are all one in Christ.

As we have seen, at the foot of the cross we are all equal, regardless of who we are or where we come from. As the world around us becomes more and more fragmented, the church must demonstrate that unity in diversity is attainable. God’s people can demonstrate the healing and reconciling power of the gospel.

Amazingly, Paul tells us how this ideal can be accomplished. “Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:23, NKJV). “And He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18, NKJV). As each believer is spiritually connected to Christ, the entire body is therefore nourished with the same food. We cannot, then, over-emphasize the importance of the study of the Word of God, obedience to what we learn in the Word, and the common experiences of worship and prayer for unity in the body of Christ.

Sheep and Shepherd

Read John 10:1–11. What aspects of this metaphor of the church as a sheepfold speak of unity? See also Psalm 23.

In the modern world of large cities, it has become very rare to see animal husbandry of any kind. Most people now know little of the relationship between sheep and shepherds. However, when Jesus told this parable, people understood Him well. When He said, “I am the good shepherd,” they immediately recognized and appreciated His reference to Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my shepherd.” The image was not only clear but also full of emotional value that made it vivid. In ancient Near Eastern culture, and still today in the Middle East, shepherds are known to be dedicated to the care of their sheep, regardless of the challenges. The figure of shepherd has become one of the dearest images used in Scripture to describe the character of God and His relationship to His people.

The image of God’s people as sheep is an interesting image. One impression we often have of sheep is their harmless and defenseless nature. Thus, they are dependent on a good shepherd for protection and guidance. They are, quite frankly, seen as stupid. Sometimes, inadvertently, sheep get lost, and the shepherd will seek them and bring them back to the fold. Young sheep often need to be carried and require extra care. Patience and understanding is needed to care for sheep. In many ways, this is a perfect image to represent the church. The church member has nothing to fear but everything to gain in a relationship with the Shepherd.

Jesus also emphasized in this parable the importance for the sheep to listen to the voice of the shepherd. When the conditions require it, it is possible to protect a few flocks of sheep by placing them in the same enclosure or sheepfold. How can they be separated later? All that is required is for the shepherd to stand at the door of the enclosure and call. His sheep will recognize his voice and come to him. “ ‘And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice’ ” (*John 10:4, NKJV*). Listening to the voice of the Shepherd is crucial for the church. In fact, the unity and safety of the people of God depend on their proximity to Him and directly are related to their submissive obedience to His voice.

People don’t generally like to be depicted as sheep. Nevertheless, why is that such an appropriate metaphor for us? What should this image tell us about our need of the Shepherd and our need to obey His voice?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Divine Shepherd,” pp. 476–484, in *The Desire of Ages*; “The Church on Earth,” pp. 240–243, in *Counsels for the Church*.

“In the context of the Temple in Jerusalem as well as the ubiquitous Greco-Roman structures, New Testament authors employ the temple metaphor to enable believers to visualize the sanctity of the church, God’s role in founding and growing the church, the defining nature of the work of Christ and the Spirit, and the solidarity of believers within the church. The architecture domain would seem to imply a static image. However, the metaphor is used in conjunction with biological imagery and the process of building is often accentuated. Rather than a static image, ‘we are impelled to visualize a story of the process of construction rather than a completed edifice.’ The church is granted the wondrous privilege of humbly acknowledging in its life and story ‘the temple of the living God’ (2 Cor. 6:16).” —John McVay, “Biblical Metaphors for the Church: Building Blocks for Ecclesiology,” in Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald®, 2013), p. 52.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Reflect on the biblical images of the church. Which one do you like most? Why are you more attracted to that one? Some other metaphors of the church can be found in these passages: 1 Tim. 3:15, 2 Tim. 2:3–5, 1 Pet. 2:9. What else do these metaphors teach about the church?
- ② “God wants His people to be united in the closest bonds of Christian fellowship; confidence in our brethren is essential to the prosperity of the church; union of action is important in a religious crisis. One imprudent step, one careless action, may plunge the church into difficulties and trials from which it may not recover for years.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 446. What should this warning teach us about how careful we must seek to be in guarding the unity of the church? What role does each one of us have in this sacred responsibility?
- ③ Sunday’s study stressed that even as “the people of God,” we must rely only on God’s grace for salvation, and never on our own merits. In fact, couldn’t you even argue that it’s our very reliance on God’s merit for salvation that indeed makes us “the people of God”? Is this a valid claim? Why or why not?

Summary: The New Testament uses different metaphors to illustrate both the nature and mission of the church. More important, these metaphors teach that God attentively is watching over His people and protects them. These images also teach that God’s people are intricately linked with each other and that we need each other to do the work that we have been called to do.

The Book Smuggler

By VLADIMIR BORISOV

After attending a pastors' conference in another country, friends asked me to take a box of 100 religious books back home. I wanted to help, but my country strictly controls the distribution of religious literature.

"I'll take the box of books only if the bus driver agrees to assume responsibility for it," I told my friends.

Bus drivers often agree to carry extra cargo in exchange for a cash payment, and my bus driver agreed to help for US\$100. A friend and I boarded the bus and settled in for the long ride.

Arriving at the border at night, the driver approached me for information about the box. He wanted to know how to speak with the border guards. When I told him that the box contained Christian books, he pulled the \$100 bill from his pocket and handed it back to me. "It's easier for me to smuggle cocaine than Christian books across the border," he said.

My friend and I had no choice. We knelt beside the bus and repacked the books into our suitcases. Then we prayed as we joined the line of passengers at the border crossing. The person ahead of us put his bags on the scanner belt and walked through customs. Then we put our suitcases on the belt. The border guard pressed the button to start the belt, but it didn't move. He pushed the button again. He pounded the button and swore. Still, the belt didn't move.

The border guard looked at us. "Fine, go," he said, motioning for us to take our suitcases from the belt.

Minutes later, my friend and I walked to the second border post to enter my home country. We put our suitcases on the belt, and the guard pressed the button. Nothing happened. He began to swear, and he finally turned to us. "Just go," he said.

Only after crossing the border did we dare look back. The guard had stopped the next person and was inspecting her bags manually. We thanked God as we sank into our bus seats.

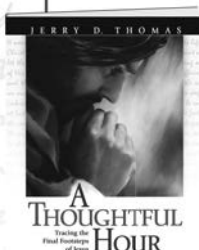
On Sabbath, a church member had a strange story to tell. A voice had awakened her at night, saying, "Pray for your pastor." She hadn't known that I was traveling and thought that I was at home asleep. The voice came again, "Pray for your pastor." Finally, she knelt and prayed for an hour.

I asked when she had heard the voice. It was the exact hour that my friend and I had crossed the border.

Although I cannot name my country, please pray for God's work. Thank you for giving mission offerings to bring the message of salvation to many around the world.

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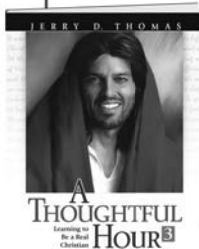
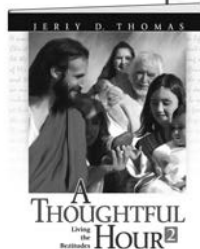
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Dedicate the first 15 minutes of each lesson to plan, pray and share:*

- ▶ **TMI IN-REACH:** Plan to visit, pray, care for missing or hurting members, and distribute territory assignments. Pray and discuss ways to minister to the needs of church families, inactive members, youth, women and men, and various ways to get the church family involved.
- ▶ **TMI OUT-REACH:** Pray and discuss ways of reaching your community, city, and world, fulfilling the Gospel Commission by sowing, reaping, and keeping. Involve all ministries in the church as you plan short-term and long-term soul-winning projects. TMI is about intentional acts of kindness. Here are some practical ways to become personally involved:
1. Develop the habit of finding needs in your community. 2. Make plans to address those needs. 3. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ **TMI UP-REACH:** Lesson Study. Encourage members to engage in individual Bible study—make study of the Bible in Sabbath School participatory. Study for transformation, not information.

TMI	Time	Explanation
Fellowship Outreach World Mission	15 min.*	Pray, plan, organize for action. Care for missing members. Schedule outreach.
Lesson Study	45 min.*	Involve everyone in the study of the lesson. Ask questions. Highlight key texts.
Lunch		Plan lunch for the class after worship. THEN GO OUT AND REACH SOMEONE!

**Adjust times as necessary.*

When Conflicts Arise



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 6:1–6; Acts 10:1–23; Matt. 5:17–20; Acts 11:3–24; Acts 15:1–22; Amos 9:11, 12.*

Memory Text: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians 3:27, 28, NKJV*).

One of the most difficult tasks of any Christian community is to maintain unity when differences of opinion arise on matters pertaining to the identity and mission of the church. These differences can lead to devastating consequences.

Today's Christian communities are no different from those we see in the New Testament. People are people, and differences, even over important points, will come. Early Christians faced some conflicts arising from perceived interpersonal prejudices and from serious differences of interpretations of key Old Testament stories and practices. These conflicts could have destroyed the church in its infancy had it not been for thoughtful apostles and leaders who sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures to resolve these tensions.

A few weeks ago we studied how the early church experienced church unity. This week we look at how the early church solved the inner conflicts that undermined its unity and threatened its survival. What were these conflicts, how were they resolved, and what can we today learn from those experiences?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 17.

Ethnic Prejudices

Read Acts 6:1. What issue in the early church caused people to complain about what appeared to be the unfair and unequitable distribution of food to widows?

Some early Christians appeared to be prejudiced against the widows of Greek heritage in their midst and provided them with less food than the widows of Hebrew heritage. This *perceived* favoritism caused a rift in the early community of believers. Whether or not the favoritism was real, the text does not say. It says only that some people believed that it was. This conflict threatened the church's unity very early on. How fascinating that ethnic division was seen so quickly in the church.

Read Acts 6:2–6. What were the simple steps taken by the early church to solve this misunderstanding?

The early church was growing rapidly, and this growth brought increasingly heavy burdens on the apostles. The appointment of these seven men, traditionally called “deacons” (although the New Testament does not call them as such), relieved the tension in the Jerusalem church and allowed for the involvement of more people in the ministry of the church.

The apostles listened carefully to the complaints of Greek-speaking believers and asked them for a solution. The selection of the seven men to become associates of the apostles was left to this group, and they recommended seven disciples, all of them from Greek-speaking heritage. These men were said to be “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (*Acts 6:3, NKJV*). The ministry of the apostles, which until then had been both to preach the Word of God and to distribute food to widows, was divided into two groups, each doing an equally valuable ministry for the proclamation of the gospel. Luke uses the same word, “ministry” or “service” (*diakonia*), to refer to both the ministry of the apostles in preaching the Word (*Acts 6:4*) and to the ministry of the deacons in distributing food (*Acts 6:1*).

What significance do you see in the fact that the leaders called many of the believers together (*Acts 6:2*) in order to try to work out a solution?

The Conversion of Gentiles

The conversion of Gentiles to the gospel of Jesus Christ is an event in the book of Acts that sets the stage for the greatest conflict in the life of the early church, one that would threaten its existence and mission.

Read Acts 10:1–23. What elements in this passage indicate that the Holy Spirit was at work in the hearts of many people to prepare the way for Gentiles to receive the gospel?

The vision must have seemed so bizarre to Peter. He was shocked by it because, as a faithful Jew, he had never partaken of unclean or defiled foods, as the law required (*see Leviticus 11, Ezek. 4:14, and Dan. 1:8*). However, the intent of this vision was not about diet but about the barriers between Jews and Gentiles that were hindering the spread of the gospel. Such barriers were at least as prevalent in the ancient world as they are today.

During the first decades, Christianity was basically made up of Jews who had accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament prophecies. These early believers in Jesus were faithful Jews who obeyed the law as they had been taught. They did not consider the gospel of Jesus Christ as having erased or abolished the Old Testament proscriptions (*see Matt. 5:17–20*).

Read Acts 10:28, 29, 34, 35. What did Peter understand was the meaning of the vision he received in Joppa? What led him to this interpretation?

What we see happening in Acts is that the Holy Spirit had prepared the way for Gentiles to be received into the fellowship of the Christian community. And they could do this without having to be circumcised and become Jews first. What convinced Peter and his friends that this was indeed God's will was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household in a similar way to what the disciples of Jesus had experienced on the day of Pentecost (*Acts 10:44–47*). If the Holy Spirit was given to Gentiles in the same way as it was given to Jews, then it was evident that being circumcised was not a prerequisite to becoming a believer in Jesus as the Messiah. This conclusion set the stage for a major theological conflict among early Christians.

The Spirit Is Leading

Reports of what happened in Caesarea with Cornelius soon reached the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem, and they asked Peter to give an account of what happened. They were offended by what Peter had done because, according to their Jewish understanding of the Law of Moses, faithful Jews were not allowed to eat with Gentiles (*Acts 11:3*).

Read Acts 11:4–18. What did Peter say to explain the work of the Holy Spirit and His leading in this event? What was the main point he was making by recounting what had happened?

Although some raised questions about the legitimacy of Peter's actions and his decision to baptize these Gentiles, sufficient witnesses (*Acts 11:12*) certified that the Holy Spirit did indeed manifest His presence in the same way as at Pentecost. The guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit in this case is unassailable and the gift acknowledged. "When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life' " (*Acts 11:18, NKJV*).

Read Acts 11:19–24. What happened next in the life of the early church?

Perhaps some in Jerusalem thought that what happened with Cornelius and his household would be an exception and that such an experience would not be repeated. But that's not what the Holy Spirit intended. As the disciples of Jesus scattered beyond Jerusalem and Judea, because of the persecution that arose after Stephen's death (*Acts 8:1*), and went to Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, subsequently more and more Gentiles accepted Jesus as their Savior. This is what Jesus had predicted (*Acts 1:8*). As wonderful as this influx of Gentiles was, if we put ourselves in the place of these early Jewish believers it's not hard to see how they weren't quite sure how to react.

How might we ourselves be holding on to narrow views of the church and of our message that could hamper our witness?

The Jerusalem Council

Read Acts 15:1, 2 and Galatians 2:11–14. What are the two issues that caused serious conflict in the early church?

The threat to church unity faced by early Christians was real and difficult. Some Jewish Christians thought that salvation was possible only for those who belonged to the covenant people of God, and this implied that circumcision was a requirement. And as part of a faithful lifestyle, these Jewish believers also believed that they were to avoid any contacts with Gentiles that could possibly thwart their own salvation.

The Jews had very strict traditions in regard to their association with Gentiles. These traditions quickly became a stumbling block for the new Christian community when the apostles began to reach out to Gentiles who wished to become followers of Jesus. Because the Messiah is the Savior of God's covenant people, as predicted in the Old Testament, weren't Gentiles supposed to become Jews first and then follow the same covenant rules if they wanted to be saved?

Read Acts 15:3–22. What were some issues presented during the Jerusalem Council?

The issue here was rooted in conflicts over deeply held interpretations of the Old Testament stories regarding circumcision and relationship with Gentiles. As apostles, elders, and delegates from Antioch sat together, it seems the discussion went on for a long time without any resolution.

But then Peter, Barnabas, and Paul made speeches. Peter's speech alluded to the visionary revelation that God gave him and to the gift of the Holy Spirit, which opened the way for the mission to the Gentiles. Then Paul and Barnabas shared their stories of what God had done through them for the Gentiles. As a result, many eyes were opened to new truth. Said Peter: "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they," meaning the Gentiles (*Acts 15:11, NKJV*). Centuries of long-held tradition were unraveling in light of the gospel.

Was there ever a time you changed your mind about how you understood a deeply held belief? What did you learn from the experience that could perhaps help you when you might again have to question your understanding of a belief?

A Difficult Solution

It took some level of trust from the church at Antioch to send representatives to Jerusalem in order to seek the best solution to their conflict. However, after hours of discussion between the apostles and elders, James, the brother of Jesus, who appears to be the leader of the assembly, made a judgment about what should be done (*Acts 15:13–20*). Clearly the council decided that Gentiles do not need to become Jewish converts, obeying all aspects of the ceremonial laws, including circumcision, in order to become Christians.

Read Amos 9:11, 12 and Jeremiah 12:14–16. What predictions did these Old Testament prophets make regarding Israel’s neighboring nations?

While James quotes from Amos 9, we see allusions to the salvation of the nations in other Old Testament prophets. It was God’s intention all along to save the entire world through Israel’s witness and experience. In fact, God’s call to Abraham included a blessing for all nations through him and his descendants (*Gen. 12:1–3*). The leading of the Holy Spirit; the ministry of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul among the Gentiles; and the conversion of many Gentiles were evidences that could not be set aside. These testimonies helped leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem realize that many Old Testament prophecies were now being fulfilled. In fact, God already had given laws guiding the presence of Gentiles in Israel and what restrictions applied to them (*Leviticus 17, 18*). James also referred to these laws in his decision (*Acts 15:29*). It became obvious to everyone that God was calling Gentiles to join His people and receive salvation in Jesus. The guidance of the Holy Spirit gave them a deeper understanding of the Scripture and revealed to them crucial truths that they had not seen before.

Acts 15:30–35 tells the response of the believers in Antioch to what was decided in Jerusalem: “The people . . . were glad for its encouraging message” (*Acts 15:31, NIV*).

We see here in Acts a powerful example of how the early church, through submission to the Word of God, along with a mind-set of love, unity, and trust, could under the guidance of the Holy Spirit avert what could have been a major crisis of unity.

What does this account teach us about how important it is for us not only to *listen* to what others are saying but to consider that they might be right, even when what they say is not exactly what we want to hear?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “A Seeker for Truth,” pp. 131–142; “Jew and Gentile,” pp. 188–200, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The council which decided this case was composed of apostles and teachers who had been prominent in raising up the Jewish and Gentile Christian churches, with chosen delegates from various places. Elders from Jerusalem and deputies from Antioch were present, and the most influential churches were represented. The council moved in accordance with the dictates of enlightened judgment, and with the dignity of a church established by the divine will. As a result of their deliberations they all saw that God Himself had answered the question at issue by bestowing upon the Gentiles the Holy Ghost; and they realized that it was their part to follow the guidance of the Spirit.

“The entire body of Christians was not called to vote upon the question. The ‘apostles and elders,’ men of influence and judgment, framed and issued the decree, which was thereupon generally accepted by the Christian churches. Not all, however, were pleased with the decision; there was a faction of ambitious and self-confident brethren who disagreed with it. These men assumed to engage in the work on their own responsibility. They indulged in much murmuring and faultfinding, proposing new plans and seeking to pull down the work of the men whom God had ordained to teach the gospel message. From the first the church has had such obstacles to meet and ever will have till the close of time.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 196, 197.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What steps toward the resolution of conflicts found in the accounts we looked at this week can be applied to your church community if and when disagreements arise? Though one issue the church was dealing with here was theological, what can we learn from these accounts that can help the church when cultural, political, or ethnic issues threaten unity? What important principles can we take away from what we have seen?
- ② Look again at the Ellen G. White quote above. Despite the positive outcome, some were still not satisfied. What lesson should we take away from this sad reality?

Summary: The early church was threatened by internal conflicts over a number of issues that could have had a devastating effect on it. We saw the way that the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and submission to the Word of God, was able to resolve these conflicts and avert schisms.

Praying for Missing Sheep

By LLOYD PERRIN

The church that I pastor in the U.S. state of Oregon has an official membership of 491 people. But only 38 percent of those members are active, a number that inches up to 44 percent if you include elderly members who are housebound because of physical or mental disabilities.

That means 56 percent of our members are inactive—a figure that I haven't found to be unusual during my decades of pastoring churches in the United States. The problem is not limited to U.S. churches. Worldwide, nearly half of all people baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the past 50 years have ended up leaving. But the church has an obligation to shepherd the flock. The apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 5:2, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you" (NKJV).

So, we started going through our membership records at the Milton Seventh-day Adventist Church in Milton-Freewater, Oregon. I will distribute a list of these missing members to each church officer. We will pray daily for each missing member by name and ask God to help us reconnect with them.

Surprises abounded when I gave a similar prayer challenge at my previous church in Spokane, Washington. About three weeks after we started to pray, I received a letter from a woman who had left the church 15 years earlier. The woman had quit church after failing to return a storybook from the church library. She had moved to another state and, she wrote, had been too lazy to find a way to return the book. But guilt had gnawed at her heart and then grown into a cancer that poisoned her relationship with God.

The woman wrote that she had suddenly remembered the book and felt convicted to reach out to the church. She apologized for taking the book and enclosed \$50 to cover the book's cost and 15 years of interest on its value.

I called up the woman immediately and learned that her sense of conviction had begun growing only when our church had started to pray 1,500 miles (2,400 kilometers) away. I put her in touch with her local Adventist pastor, and she became an active member of that church.

Soon we also will pray for missing Milton members. We need to find our missing sheep and invite them home.



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Unity in Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 4:8–12; Acts 1:11; Matt. 25:1–13; Heb. 9:11, 12; Exod. 20:8–11; 1 Cor. 15:51–54.*

Memory Text: “‘Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ ” (*Acts 4:12, NKJV*).

In 1888 Seventh-day Adventists experienced a period of intense debate over the interpretations of some key Bible texts. While pastors and church leaders were debating the identity of the ten horns of the prophecy of Daniel 7 and of the law in Galatians 3:24, few realized how their hostile attitudes toward each other destroyed their fellowship and friendship and thus marred the unity and mission of the church.

Ellen G. White deeply deplored this state of affairs and encouraged all those involved in these discussions to think carefully about their relationship with Jesus and how love for Jesus ought to be demonstrated in our conduct, especially when we disagree. She also said that we should not expect everyone in the church to agree on every point of interpretation on all Bible texts.

But she also emphasized that we should seek unity of understanding when it comes to essential Adventist beliefs (see Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 28–32). This week we look at some essential biblical teachings that make us Adventists and that shape our unity in faith.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 24.*

Salvation in Jesus

Although as Seventh-day Adventists we have much in common with other Christian bodies, our set of beliefs form a unique system of biblical truth that no one else in the Christian world is proclaiming. These truths help define us as God's end-time remnant.

Read Acts 4:8–12, 10:43. What importance does Peter give to the place of Jesus Christ in his understanding of the plan of salvation?

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that the good news is “that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19, NKJV). Christ's death is the means of our reconciliation with the Father, bridging the chasm left by sin and death. For centuries, Christians have pondered the meaning of Jesus' death, resurrection, and the reconciliation He came to accomplish. This process of reconciliation has been termed *atonement*, an old English word that originally meant “at-onement.” This is a state of being “at one,” or in agreement. Accordingly, atonement denotes harmony in a relationship, and when there has been estrangement, this harmony would be the result of reconciliation. Church unity is thus a gift of this reconciliation.

What do the following passages teach about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection?

Rom. 3:24, 25 _____

1 John 2:2 _____

1 John 4:9, 10 _____

1 Pet. 2:21–24 _____

Though we hold this belief in Christ's death and resurrection in common with many other Christian bodies, we proclaim it in the context of the “everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6), part of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12. As Seventh-day Adventists, we place an emphasis on these messages that no other Christian body does.

How can you learn to keep before you at all times the reality of Christ's death and resurrection and the hope that it offers?

Second Coming of Christ

The apostles and early Christians considered Christ's return "the blessed hope" (*Titus 2:13, NKJV*), and they expected all the prophecies and promises of Scripture to be fulfilled at the Second Advent. Seventh-day Adventists still hold firmly to this conviction. In fact, our name, "Adventist," states it unequivocally. All who love Christ look forward with anticipation to the day they will be able to share face-to-face fellowship with Him. Until that day, the promise of the second coming of Christ exerts a unifying influence on us as God's people.

What do the following passages teach about the manner of Christ's return? How does this differ from some of the popular notions of Christ's return? *Acts 1:11; Matt. 24:26, 27; Rev. 1:7; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; Rev. 19:11–16.*

The Bible repeatedly assures us that Jesus will come again to claim His redeemed people. When this event will happen should not be a matter of speculation, because Jesus Himself stated, " 'But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only' " (*Matt. 24:36, NKJV*). Not only do we not know when Christ is coming back, we have been told that we do not know.

At the end of His ministry, Jesus told the parable of the ten virgins (*Matt. 25:1–13*) in order to illustrate the experience of the church as it awaits His second coming. The two groups of virgins represent two types of believers who profess to be waiting for Jesus. Superficially, these two groups appear to be alike; but when the delay of Jesus' coming occurs, the real difference between them becomes obvious. One group, in spite of the delay, had kept its hope alive and had made the adequate spiritual preparation. By this parable Jesus wished to teach His disciples that the Christian experience is to be based not on emotional excitement or enthusiasm but on a continuous reliance on the grace of God and perseverance in faith even when there is no tangible evidence of the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus invites us still today to "watch" and be ready at any time for His coming.

Though our very name *Seventh-day Adventist* testifies to how crucial the Second Coming is to us, how can we on a personal level keep the reality of the Second Coming before us? How can we, as the years go by, not make the mistake that Jesus warned about in the parable of the ten virgins?

Jesus' Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary

In the Old Testament, God instructed Moses to build a tabernacle, or sanctuary, to serve as His “dwelling” here on earth (*Exod. 25:8*). Through its services, the sanctuary is where the people of Israel were taught the plan of salvation. Later, in the time of King Solomon, the portable tabernacle was replaced by a magnificent temple (*1 Kings 5–8*). Both the tabernacle and temple were patterned after the heavenly sanctuary, “the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man” (*Heb. 8:2, NKJV*; see also *Exod. 25:9, 40*).

Throughout the Bible, it is assumed that there is a heavenly sanctuary, serving as the primary dwelling place of God. The earthly sanctuary services were “miniprophesies” of the plan of salvation and of Jesus’ priestly ministry in heaven.

Read Hebrews 8:6; 9:11, 12, 23–28; and 1 John 1:9–2:2. What do these passages teach concerning Jesus’ priestly ministry in heaven?

Since His ascension, the heavenly sanctuary is the place where Christ conducts His priestly ministry for our salvation (see *Heb. 7:25*). Therefore, we are encouraged to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (*Heb. 4:16, NKJV*).

As the earthly tabernacle had two phases of priestly ministry—first, on a daily basis in the Holy Place and then once a year in the Most Holy Place—the Scriptures also describe these two phases of Jesus’ ministry in heaven. His ministry in the Holy Place in heaven is characterized by intercession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. Repentant sinners have immediate access to the Father through Jesus the Mediator (*1 John 2:1*). Since 1844, Jesus’ ministry in the Most Holy Place deals with the aspects of judgment and cleansing that were done once a year on the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus 16*). The ministry of cleansing the sanctuary also is based on Jesus’ shed blood. The atonement performed on this day foreshadowed the final application of the merits of Christ to remove the presence of sin and to accomplish the complete reconciliation of the universe into one harmonious government under God. The doctrine of this two-phase ministry is a unique Adventist contribution to the understanding of the entire plan of salvation.

The Sabbath

Another crucial biblical teaching that Seventh-day Adventists believe and uphold is the seventh-day Sabbath. This is a key doctrine that brings unity and fellowship among us. It is one that, with very few exceptions in Christendom, we alone follow.

The Sabbath is God's gift to humanity right from the Creation week itself (*Gen. 2:1–3*). At Creation, three distinctive divine acts established the Sabbath: (1) God rested on the Sabbath, (2) He blessed the day, and (3) He sanctified it. These three actions instituted the Sabbath as God's special gift, enabling the human race to experience the reality of heaven on earth and to affirm God's six-day Creation. A well-known rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, has called the Sabbath "a palace in time," a holy day when God meets with His people in a special way.

What do the following passages teach about the meaning of the Sabbath for humankind? *Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15; Ezek. 20:12, 20.*

In our desire to follow Jesus' example (*Luke 4:16*), Seventh-day Adventists observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Jesus' participation in Sabbath services reveals that He endorsed it as a day of rest and worship. Some of His miracles were done on the Sabbath in order to teach the dimension of healing (both physical and spiritual) that comes from the celebration of the Sabbath (*see Luke 13:10–17*). The apostles and early Christians understood that Jesus had not abolished the Sabbath; they themselves kept it as well and attended worship on that day (*Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4*).

Another beautiful dimension of the Sabbath is its sign of our deliverance from sin. The Sabbath is the memorial of God's salvation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the rest He promised in the land of Canaan (*Deut. 5:12–15*). Despite the failure of Israel to enter fully into this rest because of their repeated disobedience and idolatry, God still promises that "there remains therefore a rest for the people of God" (*Heb. 4:9, NKJV*). All who desire to enter into that rest can enter it by faith in the salvation Jesus provides. The observance of the Sabbath symbolizes this spiritual rest in Christ and that we rely only on His merits, and not works, to save us from sin and to give us eternal life. (*See Heb. 4:10, Matt. 11:28–30.*)

In what very tangible ways has the Sabbath helped you experience the unity and fellowship that Christ desires for His people?

Death and Resurrection

At Creation, “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (*Gen. 2:7, NKJV*). This account of the creation of humanity reveals that life derives from God. Is immortality an intrinsic aspect of this life? The Bible tells us that only God is immortal (*1 Tim. 6:16*); immortality is not given to humans at birth. In contrast to God, human beings are mortal. Scripture compares our lives with “a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away” (*James 4:14, NKJV*), and at death our lives enter a sleeplike state in which there is no consciousness. (See *Eccl. 9:5, 6, 10*; *Ps. 146:4*; *Ps. 115:17*; *John 11:11–15*.)

Although people are born mortal and subject to death, the Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as the source of immortality and tells us that He gives the promise of immortality and eternal life to all those who believe in His salvation. “The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NKJV*). Jesus “has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (*2 Tim. 1:10, NKJV*). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (*John 3:16, NKJV*). So, there is hope of life after death.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:51–54 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. What do these passages tell us about life after death and when immortality will be given to human beings?

The apostle Paul makes it clear that God bestows immortality upon people, not at the moment of death, but rather at the resurrection, when the last trumpet will sound. While believers receive the promise of eternal life at the moment they accept Jesus as their Savior, immortality is given only at the resurrection. The New Testament knows nothing of the idea of souls going off to heaven immediately at death; this teaching has its roots in paganism, going back to the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, and is not found in either the Old or New Testament.

How does our understanding of death help us appreciate even more the promise of the Second Coming? How does this belief powerfully unite us as Seventh-day Adventists?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Foundations, Pillars, and Landmarks,” pp. 28–32, in *Counsels to Writers and Editors*. Read the article “Doctrines, Importance of,” pp. 778, 779, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

As Seventh-day Adventists we do share important beliefs in common with some other Christian bodies. The central one, of course, is belief in salvation by faith alone through the atoning and substitutionary death of Jesus. We, along with other Christians, believe that our righteousness is found, not in our own works, but in Christ’s righteousness, which is credited to us by faith, an unmerited gift of grace. Or, as Ellen G. White famously wrote: “Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 25. At the same time, taken as a whole, our set of fundamental beliefs, and the practices and lifestyle that emerge from those beliefs, make us unique among the Christian world. That’s the way it should be, too; if not, why even exist, at least as Seventh-day Adventists? Our love of Jesus and the teaching we proclaim should be the most powerful uniting factors among us.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In *Faith and Works*, p. 103, Ellen G. White equates justification with forgiveness of sins. How is an appreciation of our forgiveness and justification in Christ a basis for our fellowship and community with brothers and sisters?
- 2 Think about how important our doctrines are in the context of church unity. That is, what has brought together millions of people from so many diverse ethnic, religious, political, and cultural backgrounds other than our shared doctrinal beliefs? What does this tell us about how important doctrine is, not just in the context of mission and message but for church unity, as well?
- 3 Our very name *Seventh-day Adventist* points to two crucial teachings, the seventh-day Sabbath and the Second Advent. One part of our name points to Creation, the other redemption. How are these two teachings related, and in what ways do they together so succinctly capture the essence of who we are as a people?

Summary: Seventh-day Adventists hold in common many fundamental beliefs. Some we hold in common with other Christians; others not. Taken as a whole, these teachings form our identity as a distinct church and are the foundation of our unity in Jesus.

Punished for Others' Sins

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

When people first met the young boy, their first question was not “What’s your name?” but “What’s wrong with your legs?”

Jack Chen crawled along the ground in his rural home in central Taiwan until he was five. Through daily physical exercises, he managed to build enough muscle to stand upright when he entered first grade. But he walked awkwardly on the balls of his feet, prompting teasing and taunts of “Freak!” from the other children. Sometimes, the boys spat on him as they passed by.

Chen was born with a leg disease that puzzled doctors. But Chen and his parents had no doubt about the cause: Someone had done something wrong in the family, and now they were being punished.

“My family worships idols, and my parents believed that we were being punished for something that they or our ancestors had done,” Chen said.

When Chen was 12, a family friend suggested that Chen, who was lagging in public school, might have a better chance studying at a nearby Seventh-day Adventist school.

Chen heard about Jesus for the first time when he enrolled in the seventh grade. He read the Bible for the first time. He decided at the age of 13 to give his heart to Jesus.

The answer to his biggest question—why he was being punished for other people’s sins—came about a year later when he read of Jesus healing a man blind from birth. He read, “And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him’ ” (John 9:2, 3; NKJV).

Chen felt a heavy burden being lifted as he read those words. “I realized that this was not a punishment but a blessing,” he said. “If I didn’t have this disease, my family and I never would have had a chance to know God.”

Chen went on to graduate from Taiwan Adventist College and now serves as a pastor in the coastal town of Jiading. He walks with a slight limp in one leg but otherwise functions normally. He is married and has two young sons.



JACK CHEN, 32, pictured left, marvels at how he found Jesus—or how Jesus found him. “I wasn’t even a Christian, but I was looking for God, for someone who could save my life,” he said. “You have to open your mind first to look for God, and then God will tell you what to do next.”

The Most Convincing Proof



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 11:51, 52; Eph. 2:13–16; 2 Cor. 5:17–21; Eph. 4:25–5:2; Rom. 14:1–6; Acts 1:14.*

Memory Text: “Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (*John 11:51, 52, NKJV*).

Last week we studied how unity is made visible through a common message, centered on Jesus as Savior and on the truths of Scripture to be emphasized in the time of the end. We are who we are because of the message that God has given us and the calling we have to spread it to the world.

This week, we focus on the visible unity of the church in its expression in the day-to-day lives of Christians and the mission of the church. According to Jesus, the church does not simply proclaim God's message of salvation and reconciliation. The unity of the church itself also is an essential expression of that reconciliation. In a world surrounded by sin and rebellion, the church stands as a visible witness to the saving work and power of Christ. Without the oneness and solidarity of the church in its common witness, the saving power of the Cross would hardly be apparent in this world. “Unity with Christ establishes a bond of unity with one another. This unity is the most convincing proof to the world of the majesty and virtue of Christ, and of His power to take away sin.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1148.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 1.

Under the Cross of Jesus

Like many other spiritual blessings God gives His people, church unity also is a gift of God. Unity is not a human creation through our efforts, good works, and intentions. Fundamentally, Jesus Christ creates that unity through His death and resurrection. As we appropriate by faith His death and resurrection through baptism and forgiveness of our sins, as we join in common fellowship, and as we spread the three angels' messages to the world, we are in union with Him and in unity with one another.

Read John 11:51, 52 and Ephesians 1:7–10. What event in the life of Jesus is the foundation of unity among us as Seventh-day Adventists?

“Now this he [Caiaphas] did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (*John 11:51, 52, NKJV*). How strange that God used Caiaphas to explain the meaning of Jesus' death, even though Caiaphas did not know what he was doing in condemning Jesus to die. Nor did the priest have any idea of just how profound his statement was. Caiaphas thought that he was making a political statement only. John, though, used it to reveal a foundational truth about what the substitutionary death of Jesus meant for all of God's faithful people, who would one day be gathered “together into one.”

Whatever else we believe as Seventh-day Adventists, whatever message we alone are proclaiming, the foundation of our unity exists in our common acceptance of Christ's death in our behalf.

And, furthermore, we also experience this unity in Christ through baptism. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (*Gal. 3:26, 27, NKJV*). Baptism is another bond that we Adventists commonly share, as it symbolizes our faith in Christ. We have a common Father; thus, we are all sons and daughters of God. And we have a common Savior in whose death and resurrection we are baptized (*Rom. 6:3, 4*).

Whatever cultural, social, ethnic, and political differences exist among us as Seventh-day Adventists, why should our common faith in Jesus transcend all such divisions?

Ministry of Reconciliation

Our world is certainly known for its disorder, troubles, wars, and conflicts. All these factors affect our lives at the personal, community, and national levels. At times it appears our entire lives are in conflict. But disunity and disorder will not prevail forever. God is on a mission to bring about cosmic unity. Whereas sin has resulted in disharmony, God's eternal plan for reconciliation brings peace and wholeness.

In Ephesians 2:13–16, Paul puts forward the principles that show how Christ acted in order to bring peace among believers: through His death on the cross Jesus made both Jews and Gentiles one people and destroyed the ethnic and religious barriers that separated them. If Christ was able to do this with Jews and Gentiles in the first century, how much more can He still bring down any racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers and walls that divide people within our own church today?

And from this starting point, we can reach out to the world.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, Paul states that in Christ we are a new creation, reconciled to God. What then is our ministry in this world? What differences could we be making in our communities as a united church body?

As God's new creation, believers receive a crucial ministry—a threefold ministry of reconciliation. (1) Our church is composed of believers who were once alienated from God but, through the saving grace of Christ's sacrifice, have now been united to God by the Holy Spirit. We are the remnant, called to proclaim an end-time message to the world. Our ministry is to invite those who are still alienated from God to be reconciled to God and join us in our mission. (2) The church also is God's people reconciled to one another. To be united to Christ means we are united to one another. This is not just a lofty ideal; it must be a visible reality. Reconciliation to one another, peace and harmony among brothers and sisters, is an unmistakable witness to the world that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer. " 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another' " (*John 13:35, NKJV*). (3) Through this ministry of reconciliation, the church tells the universe that God's plan of redemption is true and powerful. The great controversy is about God and His character. Inasmuch as the church cultivates unity and reconciliation, the universe sees the working out of God's eternal wisdom (*see Eph. 3:8–11*).

Practical Unity

In 1902, Ellen G. White wrote: “What Christ was in His life on this earth, that every Christian is to be. He is our example, not only in His spotless purity, but in His patience, gentleness, and winsomeness of disposition.”—Ellen G. White, in *Signs of the Times*, July 16, 1902. These words are reminiscent of Paul’s appeal to the Philippians: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5, NKJV*).

Read Ephesians 4:25–5:2 and Colossians 3:1–17, and then answer these two questions: In what areas of our lives in particular are we invited to show our allegiance to Jesus? How are we to be witnesses of the gospel of Jesus in our public lives?

There are many other passages of Scripture that invite Christians to follow the example of Jesus and to be living witnesses of God’s grace to others. We also are invited to seek the welfare of others (*Matt. 7:12*); to bear each other’s burdens (*Gal. 6:2*); to live in simplicity and to focus on inward spirituality instead of outward display (*Matt. 16:24–26; 1 Pet. 3:3, 4*); and to follow healthful living practices (*1 Cor. 10:31*).

“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation” (*1 Pet. 2:11, 12, NKJV*). How often do we underestimate the impact of Christian character upon those who watch us? The patience manifested in moments of annoyance, a disciplined life in the midst of tension and conflicts, a gentle spirit in response to impatience and harsh words, are marks of the spirit of Jesus we are invited to emulate. As Seventh-day Adventists witness together in a world that misunderstands the character of God, we become a power for good and for God’s glory. As representatives of Christ, believers are to be known not only for their moral rectitude but also for their practical interest in the welfare of others. If our religious experience is genuine, it will reveal itself and have an impact in the world. A unified body of believers revealing the character of Christ to the world will, indeed, be a powerful witness.

What kind of witness do you present to others? What would one find in your life that would make them want to follow Jesus?

Unity Amid Diversity

In Romans 14 and 15, the apostle Paul addresses issues that deeply were dividing the church at Rome. His response to these issues was to invite the Romans to show tolerance and patience for one another and not divide the church over these concerns. What can we learn from his counsel?

Read Romans 14:1–6. What issues of conscience were causing church members in Rome to judge and not fellowship with one another?

It is very likely that these matters had to do with Jewish ceremonial impurity. According to Paul these were “disputes over doubtful things” (*Rom. 14:1, NKJV*), indicating that they were not matters of salvation but matters of opinion that should have been left up to individual consciences (*see Rom. 14:5*).

These disputes were first over the type of food eaten. Eating animals forbidden in Leviticus 11 was not the problem addressed by Paul here. There is no evidence that early Christians began eating pork or other unclean animals during Paul’s time, and we know that Peter did not eat any such food (*see Acts 10:14*). Also, that the weak ate only vegetables (*Rom. 14:2*) and that the controversy also involved beverages (*Rom. 14:17, 21*) indicate that the concern focuses on ceremonial impurity. This is further evident by the word *unclean* (*koinos*), used in Romans 14:14. That word is used in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to impure animals, not the unclean animals of Leviticus 11. Apparently there were some people in the Roman community who would not eat at fellowship meals because they were not convinced that the food was adequately prepared or had not been sacrificed to idols.

The same goes for the observation of some days. This did not refer to the weekly observance of the Sabbath, since we know Paul observed it regularly (*Acts 13:14, 16:13, 17:2*). This is likely a reference to the various Jewish feast days or fast days. Paul’s intent in these verses is to urge tolerance for those who are sincere and conscientious in the observance of these rituals as long as they did not think of them as a means of salvation. Unity among Christians manifests itself in patience and forbearance when we do not always agree on points, especially when they are not essential to our faith.

In class, ask this question: Is there anything that we believe and practice as Seventh-day Adventists that all who claim to be Adventists need not believe and adhere to?

Unity in Mission

Contrast the mood of the disciples during the Lord's Supper in Luke 22:24 with the one they had shortly before the Pentecost experience in Acts 1:14 and 2:1, 46. What made such a difference in their lives?

In Acts 1:14 and 2:46, the phrase “with one accord” also means “persevered with one mind.” This came as a result of their being together in one place, seeking in prayer the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to send them the Comforter.

As they waited, it would have been easy for them to begin to criticize one another. Some could have pointed to Peter’s denial of Jesus (*John 18:15–18, 25–27*) and to Thomas’s doubting Jesus’ resurrection (*John 20:25*). They could have remembered John and James’s request to receive the most powerful positions in Jesus’ kingdom (*Mark 10:35–41*), or that Matthew was a former despised tax collector (*Matt. 9:9*).

However, “these days of preparation were days of deep heart searching. The disciples felt their spiritual need and cried to the Lord for the holy unction that was to fit them for the work of soul saving. They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with the burden of the salvation of souls. They realized that the gospel was to be carried to the world, and they claimed the power that Christ had promised.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 37.

The fellowship between the disciples and the intensity of their prayers prepared them for this momentous experience of Pentecost. As they drew nearer to God and put aside their personal differences, the disciples were prepared by the Holy Spirit to become the fearless and bold witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. They knew Jesus had forgiven their many shortcomings, and this gave them courage to press on ahead. They knew what Jesus had done for them in their lives. They knew the promise of salvation found in Him, and thus the “ambition of the believers was to reveal the likeness of Christ’s character and to labor for the enlargement of His kingdom.”—Page 48. No wonder the Lord was able to do powerful things through them. What a lesson for us as a church today.

It’s always so easy to find things in other people’s lives that are wrong. How can we learn to put aside the mistakes of others, all for the greater cause of doing God’s will in a united church?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Unity in Diversity,” pp. 98–103, in *Evangelism*.

The following quote helps reveal how the early church, united in Christ, was able to maintain unity despite differences among them, and thus be a powerful witness to the world. “Within the church, Scripture illustrates how the Holy Spirit guided the early church in its decision-making process. This is done in at least three closely interconnected ways: revelations (e.g., the Spirit told the people what to do; Cornelius, Ananias, Philip; and perhaps the casting of lots), Scripture (the church reached a conclusion in which the Scripture was used), and consensus (the Spirit worked from within the community, almost imperceptibly, creating a consensus through dialogue and study, at the end of which the church realized that the Spirit was working within it). It appears that when faced with cultural, doctrinal, and theological controversies among the community of believers, the Holy Spirit worked through consensus in its decision-making process. In this process, we see the active role of the community of believers and not just its leaders, and the importance of prayer for discernment. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is sensed throughout the community’s understanding of the Word of God, the experience of the community and its needs, and through the experience of its leaders as they minister. Various church decisions were made through a process guided by the Holy Spirit in which Scripture, prayer, and experience were elements of theological reflection.”—Denis Fortin, “The Holy Spirit and the Church,” in Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church*, pp. 321, 322.

Discussion Questions:

- ① In class, go over your answer to Wednesday’s question about how we decide on which teachings and practices are essential for us as Seventh-day Adventists and which aren’t.
- ② How are we to relate to Christians in other denominations who, as we do, believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Summary: The most convincing proof of unity is for brothers and sisters to love each other as Jesus did. The forgiveness of our sins and the salvation we share in common as Adventists are the best bonds of our fellowship. In Christ, we can thus show the world our unity and witness of our common faith. We are called to do nothing less.

Love Is the Best Medicine

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

A 30-year-old woman was admitted with a bad case of pneumonia to Blantyre Adventist Hospital in Malawi. When she didn't improve with antibiotics, missionary physician Tiffany Priester ordered an HIV test. The results came back positive. She had full-blown AIDS.

Priester explained to the family that it usually takes three weeks to treat pneumonia and there was a 50 percent chance that she would make it. But then the woman began to suffer kidney problems, and her chances of survival plummeted to 10 percent. Priester told the family that there wasn't much hope. "We believe in God," a family member replied. "We believe in miracles. Let's pray."

Surrounded by the family, Priester prayed for a cure and put the patient on a ventilation machine. The woman's kidneys shut down 24 hours later. All hope seemed lost. But then she began to recover. A few weeks later, she walked out of the hospital. "Medicine has its limits," Priester said. "The hospital does what it can do, and the Lord does the rest."

Priester, a U.S. cardiologist, worked for five years in Blantyre, the second-largest city in Malawi with a population of about one million. Blantyre Adventist Hospital—which employs six missionary doctors, two missionary dentists, and seven Malawian doctors—did not have a cardiologist for the decade before she arrived in 2011, a common problem in a country with only one medical doctor for every 88,000 people.

Priester's reason for mission is John 13:35, where Jesus says, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (NKJV).

One day, a Malawian woman complained that she awoke with her heart pounding every night around midnight. Tests came back normal, and other doctors might have written off the case as the result of bad dreams. "But that day I think the Holy Spirit prompted me to ask more," Priester said.

Priester learned that the patient had started having sleeping problems after meeting a self-professed prophet who had warned her that she would be raped at midnight. Priester asked the woman whether the man or God was stronger. "Put your trust in God," she said.

"You are the first doctor to tell me that God is strong," the woman replied.

This, said Priester, pictured left, is what it means to "love one another"—making an extra effort to provide physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

"Sometimes it's the small things that set us apart," she said.



Unity *and* Broken Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Tim. 4:11, Philem. 1–25, 2 Cor. 10:12–15, Rom. 5:8–11, Eph. 4:26, Matt. 18:15–17.*

Memory Text: “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (*Romans 5:10, NKJV*).

As we have seen, even after Pentecost the relationship between believers was at times strained. The New Testament records repeated examples of the way that church leaders and individual members dealt with such challenges. These principles are extremely valuable for the church today. They reveal the positive results that can come when we use biblical principles to deal with conflicts and preserve our oneness in Christ.

In this week's lesson, we will focus on restored relationships and how our human relationships impact our oneness in Christ. The ministry of the Holy Spirit involves bringing people closer to God and to one another. It includes breaking down the barriers in our relationship with God and breaking down barriers in our relationships with one another. In short, the greatest demonstration of the power of the gospel is not necessarily what the church says but how the church lives.

“ ‘By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Without this love all our talk about church unity will come to nothing.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 8.

Restored Friendship

Paul and Barnabas worked together in witnessing for Jesus. But they had a disagreement over whether they could trust one as fearful as John Mark (*Acts 15:36–39*). The potential dangers of preaching the gospel had caused John Mark at one point to desert Paul and Barnabas and return home (*Acts 13:13*).

“This desertion caused Paul to judge Mark unfavorably, and even severely, for a time. Barnabas, on the other hand, was inclined to excuse him because of his inexperience. He felt anxious that Mark should not abandon the ministry, for he saw in him qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 170.

Although God used all these men, the issues between them needed resolution. The apostle who preached grace needed to extend grace to a young preacher who had disappointed him. The apostle of forgiveness needed to forgive. John Mark grew in the affirming mentorship of Barnabas (*Acts 15:39*), and, eventually, Paul’s heart was apparently touched by the changes.

How do Paul’s letters to Timothy and the church at Colosse reveal his renewed relationship with John Mark and a new confidence in this young preacher? *Col. 4:10, 11; 2 Tim. 4:11*.

Although details of Paul’s reconciliation with John Mark may be sketchy, the biblical record is clear. John Mark became one of the apostle’s trusted companions. Paul highly recommended John Mark as a “fellow worker” to the church at Colosse. At the end of Paul’s life, he strongly encouraged Timothy to bring John Mark with him to Rome because he was “useful to me for ministry” (*2 Tim. 4:11, NKJV*). Paul’s ministry was enriched by the young preacher, whom he obviously had forgiven. The barrier between them had been broken down, and they were able to work together in the cause of the gospel. Whatever the issues between them, and however justified Paul might have believed himself to be in regard to his earlier attitude toward John Mark, it was all behind him now.

How can we learn to forgive those who have hurt or disappointed us? At the same time, why does forgiveness not always include a complete restoration of a previous relationship? Why does it not always need to?

From Slave to Son

While he was imprisoned in Rome, Paul met a runaway slave named Onesimus, who had fled from Colosse to Rome. Paul realized that he personally knew Onesimus's master. The Epistle to Philemon is Paul's personal appeal to his friend regarding a restored relationship with the runaway slave.

Relationships mattered to Paul. The apostle knew that fractured relationships are detrimental to spiritual growth and to church unity. Philemon was a church leader in Colosse. If he harbored bitterness toward Onesimus, it would color his Christian witness and the witness of the church to the nonbelieving community.

Read Philemon 1–25. What important principles about restored relationships can we find here? Remember, the key word is “principles.”

At first glance it is somewhat surprising that Paul did not speak more forcefully against the evils of slavery. But Paul's strategy was far more effective. The gospel, ideally, breaks down all class distinctions (*Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:10, 11*). The apostle sent Onesimus back to Philemon, not as a slave but as his son in Jesus and as Philemon's “beloved brother” in the Lord (*Philemon 16, NKJV*).

Paul knew that runaway slaves had a bleak future. They could be apprehended at any time. They were doomed to a life of destitution and poverty. But now, as Philemon's brother in Christ and willing worker, Onesimus could have a better future. His food, lodging, and job could be made secure under Philemon. The restoration of a broken relationship could make a dramatic difference in his life. He became a “faithful and beloved brother” and colaborer in the gospel with Paul (*Col. 4:9*). Paul was so fervent, so adamant, in his desire for reconciliation between them that he was willing to pay out of his own pocket any financial issues that might have arisen from what happened between the two believers in Jesus.

Drawing from the principles of the gospel as seen here, what can you take away that can help you deal with whatever stresses and strains, even fractures, you have in relationships with others? How can these principles prevent a breakdown in the unity of your local church?

Spiritual Gifts for Unity

As we saw in an earlier lesson, the church at Corinth had deep problems. What principles does Paul outline in 1 Corinthians 3:5–11, 12:1–11, and 2 Corinthians 10:12–15 for healing and restoration, which are so vital to church unity?

In these passages, the apostle outlines critical principles for church unity. He points out that Jesus uses different workers to accomplish different ministries in His church, even though each one is laboring together for the building up of God’s kingdom (*1 Cor. 3:9*).

God calls us to cooperation, not competition. Each believer is gifted by God to cooperate in ministering to the body of Christ and serving the community (*1 Cor. 12:11*). There are no greater or lesser gifts. All are necessary in Christ’s church (*1 Cor. 12:18–23*). Our God-given gifts are not for selfish display, and they are given by the Holy Spirit for service in the spreading of the gospel.

All comparisons with others are unwise, because they will make us feel either discouraged or arrogant. If we think that others are far “superior” to us, we will feel despondent when we compare ourselves to them and easily can get discouraged in whatever ministry we are in. On the other hand, if we think our labors for Christ are more effective than is the work of others, we will feel proud, which is the last sentiment any Christian should be harboring.

Both attitudes cripple our effectiveness for Christ and the fellowship we have with one another. As we labor within the sphere of influence that Christ has given us, we will find joy and contentment in our witness for Christ. Our labors will complement the efforts of other members, and the church of Christ will make giant strides for the kingdom.

Can you think of someone whose gifts in ministry have made you jealous? (Not too hard, is it?) At the same time, how often have you felt proud of your gifts in contrast to those of others? The point is that Paul’s concerns are an ever-present reality in fallen human beings. Regardless of the side on which we fall, how can we learn the unselfish attitudes that are necessary in order to maintain our oneness in Christ?

Forgiveness

What is forgiveness? Does forgiveness justify the behavior of someone who has horribly wronged us? Is my forgiveness dependent on the offender's repentance? What if the one with whom I am upset does not deserve my forgiveness?

How do the following passages help us to understand the biblical nature of forgiveness? *Rom. 5:8–11; Luke 23:31–34; 2 Cor. 5:20, 21; Eph. 4:26.*

Christ took the initiative in reconciling us to Himself. It is the “goodness of God [that] leads you to repentance” (*Rom. 2:4, NKJV*). In Christ we were reconciled to God while we were yet sinners. Our repentance and confession do not create reconciliation. Christ's death on the cross did; our part is to accept what was done for us.

It is true that we cannot receive the blessings of forgiveness until we confess our sins. This does not mean that our confession creates forgiveness in God's heart. Forgiveness was in His heart all the time. Confession, instead, enables us to receive it (*1 John 1:9*). Confession is vitally important, not because it changes God's attitude toward us, but because it changes our attitude toward Him. When we yield to the Holy Spirit's convicting power to repent and confess our sin, we are changed.

Forgiveness also is crucial for our own spiritual well-being. A failure to forgive someone who has wronged us, even if they do not deserve forgiveness, can hurt us more than it hurts them. If an individual has wronged you and the pain festers inside because you fail to forgive, you are allowing them to hurt you even more. Such feelings and hurt often are the cause of divisions and tensions in the church. Unresolved hurt between church members hurts the unity of the body of Christ.

Forgiveness is releasing another from our condemnation because Christ has released us from His condemnation. It does not justify another's behavior toward us. We can be reconciled to someone who has wronged us, because Christ reconciled us to Himself when we wronged Him. We can forgive because we are forgiven. We can love because we are loved. Forgiveness is a choice. We can choose to forgive in spite of the other person's actions or attitudes. This is the true spirit of Jesus.

How can focusing on the forgiveness we have in Christ help us learn to forgive others? Why is this forgiveness such an essential aspect of our Christian experience?

Restoration and Unity

Read Matthew 18:15–17. What three steps does Jesus give us to help us to resolve conflicts when we are wronged by another church member? How are we to apply these words in our contemporary situations?

Jesus' desire in giving the counsel of Matthew 18 is to keep interpersonal conflict within the church in as small a group as possible. His intent is that the two people involved solve the problem themselves. This is why Jesus declares, “ ‘If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone’ ” (*Matt. 18:15, NKJV*). As the number of people involved in a conflict between two individuals increases, the more contention can be created, and the more it can affect the fellowship of other believers. People take sides, and battle lines are drawn. But when Christians attempt to settle their differences privately, and in the spirit of Christian love and mutual understanding, a climate of reconciliation is created. The atmosphere is right for the Holy Spirit to work with them as they strive to resolve their differences.

Sometimes personal appeals for conflict resolution are ineffective. In these instances Jesus invites us to take one or two others with us. This second step in the reconciliation process always must follow the first step. The purpose is to bring people together, not drive them further apart. The one or two who join the offended party are not coming to prove his or her point or to join in blaming the other individual. They come in Christian love and compassion as counselors and prayer partners in order to participate in the process of bringing two estranged people together.

There are occasions when all attempts to solve the problem do not work. In this case, Jesus instructs us to bring the issue before the church. He certainly is not talking about interrupting the Sabbath morning worship service with an issue of personal conflict. The appropriate place to bring the issue, if the first two steps have not helped to reconcile the two parties, is the church board. Again, Christ's purpose is reconciliation. It is not to blame one party and exonerate the other.

“Do not suffer resentment to ripen into malice. Do not allow the wound to fester and break out in poisoned words, which taint the minds of those who hear. Do not allow bitter thoughts to continue to fill your mind and his. Go to your brother, and in humility and sincerity talk with him about the matter.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 499.

Further Thought: Read the article “Forgiveness,” pp. 825, 826, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“When the laborers have an abiding Christ in their own souls, when all selfishness is dead, when there is no rivalry, no strife for the supremacy, when oneness exists, when they sanctify themselves, so that love for one another is seen and felt, then the showers of the grace of the Holy Spirit will just as surely come upon them as that God’s promise will never fail in one jot or tittle.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 175.

“If we stand in the great day of the Lord with Christ as our refuge, our high tower, we must put away all envy, all strife for the supremacy. We must utterly destroy the roots of these unholy things, that they may not again spring up into life. We must place ourselves wholly on the side of the Lord.”—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, p. 190.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Read Colossians 3:12–17. Discuss the Christian qualities the apostle Paul encourages the church at Colosse to seek. Why are these qualities the basis for all conflict resolution? How do they guide us in carrying out the principles that Jesus gives us in Matthew 18:15–18?
- ❷ Look again at Colossians 3:12–17 and the teachings found in these verses. Why are these things so utterly essential for the unity in the church?
- ❸ If we look at our church, that is, the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a whole, what is the greatest thing holding us back from the kind of unity that will be needed in order to reach the world? Is it our teachings and doctrines? Of course not. These are the very things that God has given us to proclaim to the world. Maybe the problem exists solely in us, in our interpersonal relationships, our petty jealousies, our bickering, our selfishness, our desire for supremacy, and a whole host of other things. Why must you plead for the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the changes that have to occur in you before we see unity in the whole church?

Summary: The gospel of Jesus Christ is about healing and transformation. And when these come, they cannot help impacting our relationship with others. The Bible gives us powerful principles and examples of how we can have good and close relationships with others, even in a world of sin.

Our Church Is Schools

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Seventh-day Adventist education is the path to people's hearts in Bangladesh, church leaders said.

"Our church in Bangladesh is basically schools," said Milton Das, communication director for the Bangladesh Union Mission. "Education is the strongest medium to reach the people of Bangladesh. Where there is a church, there is a school."

That first mission station, which paved the way for Adventist education to blossom in the country, was founded in 1906 by Lal Gopal Mookerjee and his wife, U.S. schoolteacher Grace Kellogg, in then-East Bengal.

Today, Adventist schools are thriving centers of influence across this country of 162 million people, with some 10,000 students attending 174 village schools, 10 city schools, and nine boarding schools. About 60 to 70 percent of the students are non-Adventist, and the figure rises to 99 percent in city schools such as the Dhaka Adventist Pre-Seminary school, which teaches 1,535 students in the country's capital.

Adventist education is in high demand, with parents from various faiths wanting their children to learn Christian values, Das said.

"There are many more children waiting to go to school," said Das, who also oversees Bangladesh Children Sponsorship Services, a department of the Bangladesh Union Mission that covers the tuition costs of 3,000 underprivileged children a year through partnerships with the General Conference, Adventist supporting ministry Asian Aid, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

Das himself received 16 years of Adventist education after an Australian woman paid his monthly tuition costs through Asian Aid. He said 90 percent of local church leaders were sponsored as children.

Shova Rani Bayen, 76, a retired schoolteacher, told of how she saw Adventist education change the lives of the Santali people living near Bangladesh's border with Myanmar. She said the people wore nothing more than scant cloths to cover their genitals and ate all living creatures—including snails, rats, cats, and dogs—when she first arrived in the area with her husband, evangelist Narottom Bayen, in the early 1960s. The adults had no desire to live differently. "But then we opened a church school," Bayen said. "Many of those children are now church workers, pastors, and evangelists."



MILTON DAS, far left, visiting an Adventist school in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Unity in Worship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rev. 4:8, 11; Matt. 4:8, 9; Dan. 3:8–18; Rev. 14:9; Rev. 14:6, 7; Acts 4:23–31.*

Memory Text: “Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water’ ” (*Revelation 14:6, 7, NKJV*).

Soon after the Day of Pentecost, the early Christians spent much of their time in worship. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). The joy that came from knowing Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, filled their hearts with thanksgiving and gratitude to God. What a privilege to know this wonderful truth. These early Christians felt the need to spend time together in fellowship, study, and prayer, all in order to thank God for His revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and for what He had done in their lives.

The church of Jesus Christ is by definition a worshipping community, called into being by God to be “a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NKJV*). Gratitude to God expressed in community worship transforms people’s hearts and minds into the likeness of the character of God and prepares them for service.

This week’s lesson focuses on the meaning of worship and how it preserves unity among believers in Jesus.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 15.

Worshipping Our Creator and Redeemer

In discussions about worship, we often highlight elements of worship, what it includes and how it is done. But what is the deep meaning of worship? What does it mean to worship God? And why do we do it? In Psalm 29:2, David states: “Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (*Ps. 29:2, NKJV*). This psalm points us in the right direction to understand the meaning of worship. To worship the Lord is to give Him the glory and honor He deserves.

Read Revelation 4 and 5. What reasons do the inhabitants of heaven give for worshipping God and Jesus, the Lamb of God? See Rev. 4:8, 11; 5:9, 10, 12, 13.

This depiction of worship in the throne room of heaven as Jesus is introduced as the Lamb of God and Savior of the world is awe-inspiring. Worship happens when God’s creation responds to Him with words of adoration and thankfulness for what He has done. Worship is the response of a grateful person for God’s creation and salvation. At the end of time, the redeemed also will join in adoration and respond in a similar way to God’s salvation. “ ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested’ ” (*Rev. 15:3, 4, NKJV*).

So, worship is a response of our faith in God for His mighty works: first, for creating us, and, second, for redeeming us. In worship we give to God the adoration, reverence, praise, love, and obedience we believe He is worthy to receive. Of course, what we know about God, as our Creator and Savior, comes from what He revealed to us in Scripture. Furthermore, what Christians know about God was revealed more fully in the person and ministry of Jesus (*see John 14:8–14*). That is why Christians worship Jesus as Savior and Redeemer, as His sacrificial death and resurrection are at the very core of worship.

When Christians come together in worship, it is out of this sense of awe and thankfulness that our worship should proceed.

Think about what we have been given in Christ as our Creator and Savior, about what He has spared us from, and about what He offers us—all because He willingly died in our stead. Why should these truths be the foundation of all our worship?

False Worship

Read Matthew 4:8, 9. What was Jesus' third temptation in the wilderness?

With pride and arrogance, Satan declared himself to be the rightful ruler of the world, the owner of all its riches and glory, claiming the honor and respect of all who live in it, as if he had created the world. What an insult to God, the Creator. Satan revealed that he knows exactly what worship is about: it is to give honor and respect to the rightful owner of the universe.

Compare the experience of the three Hebrew friends in Daniel 3 (especially verses 8–18) with that of the believers who will face the end-time power of Revelation 13:4 and 14:9–11. What is at stake at the time of the end? What is the core issue in both accounts?

From Cain and Abel, to the three Hebrew boys in Babylon, to final events regarding “the mark of the beast” (*Rev. 16:2*), Satan seeks to establish a false system of worship, one that takes people away from the true God and, even if subtly, direct worship toward himself. After all, even from before the Fall, he wanted to be like God (*Isa. 14:14*). It's no coincidence that just as the three young men faced the threat of death unless they were to worship an “image,” in the last days God's faithful people will face the threat of death unless they will worship an “image,” as well. Why worship any “image” when we are called to worship the true God instead?

“Important are the lessons to be learned from the experience of the Hebrew youth on the plain of Dura. . . .

“The season of distress before God's people will call for a faith that will not falter. His children must make it manifest that He is the only object of their worship, and that no consideration, not even that of life itself, can induce them to make the least concession to false worship. To the loyal heart the commands of sinful, finite men will sink into insignificance beside the word of the eternal God. Truth will be obeyed though the result be imprisonment or exile or death.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 512, 513.

What are different ways, even now, that we can be tempted into worshiping anyone else other than the only Being worthy of our worship? How might false worship be a more subtle threat than we realize? What are some things that we might even now be tempted to worship?

The First Angel's Message

Seventh-day Adventists see the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12 as depicting their mission and the core of their message just before the second coming of Jesus (*Rev. 14:14–20*). These are the important messages to be preached with “a loud voice” to all inhabitants of the earth.

Read Revelation 14:6, 7. What is the first angel's message, and what does it say about God? Why is there a reference to worship in this message?

The first of the three angels' messages proclaims a message to the entire world. This is the fulfillment of Jesus' prediction in Matthew 24:14. There is a sense of urgency and haste in the depiction of these three angels and their mission. The first message urges people to focus on God because “ ‘the hour of His judgment has come’ ” (*Rev. 14:7, NKJV*). The second coming of Jesus is the catalyst for the judgment.

“ ‘Fear God,’ ” the angel says (*Rev. 14:7*). For those who do not take God seriously, this message and call to action will indeed generate fear in their mind. But for those who have been followers of Jesus, this call invites awe and respect. They look up to God and see the fulfillment of His promises. A sense of grateful reverence for God overtakes them.

“ ‘And worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water’ ” (*Rev. 14:7, NKJV*). This language makes an unmistakable allusion to the Sabbath commandment, with its reference to Creation (*see Exod. 20:8–11*). The God of Creation, who instituted the Sabbath as a memorial of His creative power, is the One who is to be worshiped and revered.

It is interesting to note that at the end of time worship is identified as a key issue in the great controversy for the allegiance of the human race. This worldwide announcement is a call to worship the Creator.

“The central issue in the final crisis will be worship. Revelation makes clear that the test will not be denial of worship, but rather who is worshiped. At the time of the end, only two groups of people will be in the world: those who fear and worship the true God (*11:1, 18; 14:7*) and those who hate the truth and are worshipers of the dragon and the beast (*13:4–8, 14:9–11*). . . .

“If worship is the central issue in the final conflict, no wonder then that God sends His end-time gospel urging the inhabitants of the earth to take Him seriously and worship Him as the Creator, the only One worthy of worship.”—Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2002), pp. 444, 445.

Bible Study and Fellowship

Read Acts 2:42. What were some of the elements of early Christian worship?

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). From the earliest moments of the church, worship has been characterized by the centrality of the study of the Word of God given to us by the apostles. The first Christians were faithful in studying the Scriptures for what they said about Jesus the Messiah. They were in constant fellowship to share with one another the blessings God had given them and to encourage each other in their spiritual walk with God. In the Word they mined the sacred truths that became the foundation of their message to the world.

What do the following passages say about the importance of studying God’s Word in fellowship with other believers?

2 Kings 22:8–13 _____

Acts 17:10, 11 _____

2 Tim. 3:14–17 _____

“Wherever the truths of the gospel are proclaimed, those who honestly desire to do right are led to a diligent searching of the Scriptures. If, in the closing scenes of this earth’s history, those to whom testing truths are proclaimed would follow the example of the Bereans, searching the Scriptures daily, and comparing with God’s word the messages brought them, there would today be a large number loyal to the precepts of God’s law, where now there are comparatively few.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 232.

We are a united people because of the truths that we proclaim, truths that we find from the Word of God. This was true of God’s church in the early days, and it is true of it today. The study of God’s Word forms the core of both our worship to God and our unity as a people who have been called to proclaim the three angels’ messages to the world. When we come together as a family to fellowship and worship, the Scriptures speak to us words from God to guide our lives in preparation for our mission and for Jesus’ second coming.

How firmly grounded are you, from the Bible, in what we believe? That is, are you grounded enough in it to the point where you could, like the three Hebrew boys, stand firm in the face of death?

Breaking of Bread and Prayer

Whatever the challenges the early church faced, they were united in their common faith in Jesus and in the truth He had entrusted them to spread to the world. It's what Peter even called "present truth" (*2 Pet. 1:12*). And thus, united in the truth, they expressed their unity in a number of ways.

"And they continued steadfastly . . . in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). This reference to breaking of bread probably refers to a fellowship meal or to regular meals shared between believers. At some point during a fellowship meal, someone would offer a special blessing over the bread and drink in memory of Jesus' death and resurrection, in expectation of His soon return. Early Christians thus devoted their time to remembering the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry, and loved to talk about it in fellowship meals. The meals they shared became moments of worship. "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (*Acts 2:46, 47, NKJV*). No doubt this time of fellowship together greatly helped strengthen the sense of unity they had in Jesus.

What examples do we have in the book of Acts of early Christians praying together? What did they pray for?

Acts 1:14 _____

Acts 4:23–31 _____

Acts 12:12 _____

The early church cherished the opportunity for direct communication with God and never failed to offer up petitions to Him when gathered together in worship. Paul in his First Epistle to Timothy mentions the importance of prayer when Christians are together (*1 Tim. 2:1*). To the Ephesians, he also emphasized the need of prayer: "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me" (*Eph. 6:18, 19, NKJV*).

What are ways that we can experience a deeper unity through the power of intercessory prayer for common causes? How does this prayer help unite us as a church?

Further Thought: Read the articles “Prayer,” pp. 1044–1046, and “Worship,” pp. 1290, 1291, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“ ‘The importance of the Sabbath as the memorial of creation is that it keeps ever present the true reason why worship is due to God’—because He is the Creator, and we are His creatures. ‘The Sabbath therefore lies at the very foundation of divine worship, for it teaches this great truth in the most impressive manner, and no other institution does this. The true ground of divine worship, not of that on the seventh day merely, but of all worship, is found in the distinction between the Creator and His creatures. This great fact can never become obsolete, and must never be forgotten.’—J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, chapter 27. It was to keep this truth ever before the minds of men, that God instituted the Sabbath in Eden; and so long as the fact that He is our Creator continues to be a reason why we should worship Him, so long the Sabbath will continue as its sign and memorial. Had the Sabbath been universally kept, man’s thoughts and affections would have been led to the Creator as the object of reverence and worship, and there would never have been an idolater, an atheist, or an infidel. The keeping of the Sabbath is a sign of loyalty to the true God, ‘Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.’ It follows that the message which commands men to worship God and keep His commandments will especially call upon them to keep the fourth commandment.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 437, 438.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Since the biblical concepts of worship, creation, and salvation are so closely intertwined, how do you think the celebration of the Sabbath could be God’s antidote to false worship? What role does the Sabbath play in this end-time prophecy of Revelation 14:6, 7? Why is the Sabbath referred to in the first angel’s message?
- ❷ Oftentimes we talk about worship as a matter of content—things we should do or not do during worship. Is that good enough? What is worship really about? How is your local church experiencing meaningful worship?
- ❸ In some societies, Christian community worship slowly is being forgotten or abandoned, even in Adventist communities. What can your local church do to counter this trend?

Summary: Worship is the Christian believer’s thankful response to God for His gift of salvation. It also is an essential element of the Christian community’s experience of unity and fellowship. Without prayer and Bible study in a desire to know God’s truth for us, our community will fail to experience oneness in Christ.

Ukrainian Builds 22 Churches

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Construction company chief Vladimir Vladovskyy knew it would take a miracle to build a Seventh-day Adventist church in the northern Russian seaport of Arkhangelsk.

He had no blueprint for the project. He had only a few summer months to build the church. And a senior city administrator, without giving a reason, had vowed never to sign the paperwork.

So, Vladovskyy secured a blueprint for the church's foundation and started work.

"Summer is very short in Arkhangelsk, and we didn't have time to deal with bureaucracy," said Vladovskyy, a Ukrainian native who has built 22 Adventist churches and other church facilities in Russia, Ukraine, and Mongolia over two decades. "So, we started building."

After laying the foundation, Vladovskyy received the blueprint for the second stage and put his construction crew to work on the walls. Then came the next blueprint and the roof.

Remarkably, no one from the city government tried to stop the construction. Vladovskyy, however, had not forgotten about the official paperwork. Vladovskyy gathered his crew every morning to pray for a miracle at the construction site.

A month passed. Two months. Three months. Arkhangelsk's summer lasts for only three months, from June to August. The exterior of the church was completed before the first snow fell in September. The interior was finished in December.

Vladovskyy returned to the city administrator to ask for the documents. He didn't know what to expect, but he felt at peace, knowing that he had prayed daily and that the weather had stayed warm long enough to finish the church.

The city administrator didn't say a word. He simply signed every document.

"In the end, he signed everything," Vladovskyy said. "I don't know why. It was a miracle."

Vladovskyy, a third-generation Adventist who restored old buildings for a state construction company during Soviet times, has encountered many miracles since he first teamed up with the Adventist Church by constructing the Euro-Asia Division's headquarters in Moscow in 1995. Currently, he is building churches in Krasnoyarsk, Tomsk, and a third Russian city.

But no miracle has been quite as remarkable as the one in Arkhangelsk in 1999, he said in an interview in Ukraine's capital, Kiev.

"We built a church without a blueprint and without permission," he said.



VLADIMIR VLADOVSKYY holding a photo of the Arkhangelsk church.

Church Organization *and* Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 5:23–27; Matt. 20:25–28; Titus 1:9; Matt. 16:19; Gal. 6:1, 2; Matt. 28:18–20.*

Memory Text: “‘Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave’ ” (*Matthew 20:26, 27, NKJV*).

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are Protestant Christians who believe that salvation is through faith alone in what Jesus Christ has accomplished for humanity. We do not need a church or a church hierarchy in order to receive the benefits of what Christ has done for us. What we get from Christ we get directly from Him, as our Substitute on the cross and as our mediating High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

Nevertheless, the church is God's creation, and God placed it here for us, not as a means of salvation but as a vehicle to help us express and make manifest that salvation to the world. The church is an organization that Jesus created for the spreading of the gospel into the world. Organization is important insofar as it solidifies and enables the mission of the church. Without a church organization, Jesus' saving message could not as effectively be communicated to others. Church leaders are important, too, in that they foster unity and exemplify the example of Jesus.

This week we study why church organization is crucial for mission and how it can foster church unity.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 22.

Christ, the Head of the Church

As we have seen already in an earlier lesson, in the New Testament the church is represented by the metaphor of a body. The church is the body of Christ. This metaphor alludes to several aspects of the church and the relationship between Christ and His people. As the body of Christ, the church depends on Him for its very existence. He is the Head (*Col. 1:18, Eph. 1:22*) and the Source of the life of the church. Without Him there would be no church.

The church also derives its identity from Christ, for He is the Source and the Foundation and the Originator of its belief and teachings. Yet, the church is more than these things, as crucial as they are to its identity. It is Christ and His Word as revealed in Scripture that determine what the church is. Thus, the church derives its identity and significance from Christ.

In Ephesians 5:23–27, Paul uses the relationship between Christ and His church to illustrate the kind of relationship there should be between husband and wife. What are the key ideas of this relationship between Christ and His church?

Although we may be hesitant with the concept of submission because of how leaders in the centuries past have abused it, the church is nonetheless to be subject to the Head, Christ, and is subject to His authority. Our acknowledgment of Christ as the Head of the church helps us remember to whom our ultimate allegiance must belong, and that is the Lord Himself and to no one else. The church is to be organized, but that organization always must be subordinate to the authority of Jesus, the true Leader of our church.

“The church is built upon Christ as its foundation; it is to obey Christ as its head. It is not to depend upon man, or be controlled by man. Many claim that a position of trust in the church gives them authority to dictate what other men shall believe and what they shall do. This claim God does not sanction. The Saviour declares, ‘All ye are brethren.’ All are exposed to temptation, and are liable to error. Upon no finite being can we depend for guidance. The Rock of faith is the living presence of Christ in the church. Upon this the weakest may depend, and those who think themselves the strongest will prove to be the weakest, unless they make Christ their efficiency.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 414.

How can we learn to depend upon Christ and not upon any “finite being,” as it is so easy to do?

Servant Leadership

During His ministry with His disciples, Jesus repeatedly experienced moments when He probably felt exasperated by the envy for power they seemed to have. The apostles appeared to be anxious to become powerful leaders of Jesus' kingdom (*Mark 9:33, 34; Luke 9:46*). Even as the disciples were eating the Last Supper together, these feelings of domination and supremacy were palpably felt among them (*Luke 22:24*).

During one such occasion, Jesus clearly expressed His thoughts regarding spiritual leadership among His people. What principles of leadership do we learn from Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 20:25–28? How can we manifest this principle in our lives and especially in our churches?

“In this concise passage Jesus presents us with two models of authority. The first is the Roman idea of authority. In this model, the elite stand hierarchically over others. They have the power to make decisions and expect submission from those below them. Jesus clearly rejected this model of authority when He stated, ‘Not so with you!’ Instead He presented the disciples with a breathtakingly new model of authority, a thorough rejection, or reversal, of the hierarchical model with which they were familiar.”—Darius Jankiewicz, “Serving Like Jesus: Authority in God’s Church,” *Adventist Review*, March 13, 2014, p. 18.

The concept of authority that Jesus presents in this story is based on two key words: “servant” (*diakonos*) and “slave” (*doulos*). In some Bible versions, the first word, “servant,” is often translated “minister,” and the second, “servant” or “bondservant.” Both words thus lose much of the force of Jesus’ intent. Although Jesus did not wish to abolish all authority structures, what He wished to emphasize is that church leaders must first of all be servants and slaves of God’s people. Their positions are not to exercise authority over people or to dominate them or to give themselves prestige and reputation. “Christ was establishing a kingdom on different principles. He called men, not to authority, but to service, the strong to bear the infirmities of the weak. Power, position, talent, education, placed their possessor under the greater obligation to serve his fellows.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 550.

Read John 13:1–20. What example of leadership did Jesus give His disciples? What is Jesus still trying to teach us in this passage? How can we manifest the principle here in all our actions with others, in and outside of the church?

Preserving Church Unity

Read 2 Timothy 2:15 and Titus 1:9. According to Paul's counsels to Timothy and Titus, what crucial tasks are the responsibility of a faithful church leader and elder?

Notice how much emphasis Paul puts on keeping the doctrines and teachings pure. This is crucial for unity, especially because one could argue that, more than anything else, our teachings are what unify our church. Again, as Adventists, as people from so many different walks of life, cultures, and backgrounds, our unity in Christ is found in our understanding of the truth that Christ has given. If we get confused on these teachings, then only chaos and division will come, especially as we near the end.

“I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:1–4, NKJV).

With these words, Paul focuses his inspired thoughts on the second coming of Jesus and on the day of judgment. The apostle uses all his God-given authority (see 1 Tim. 1:1) to give Timothy this important counsel. In the context of the last days, with false teachings abounding and immorality rising, Timothy is to preach the Word of God. That is the ministry he has been called to.

As part of his teaching ministry, Timothy is to convince, rebuke, and exhort. These verbs are reminiscent of the guidance given by the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16). Clearly, Timothy's work is to follow, teach, and implement what he finds in the Scriptures and to do so with long-suffering and patience. Harsh and severe rebukes rarely bring a sinner to Christ. By following what Paul wrote, and following it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with a servant-leader attitude, Timothy would be a powerfully unifying force in the church.

What are practical ways that we can help our church leaders maintain unity in the church? How can we make sure we are always a force for unity as opposed to disunity, even amid disputes?

Church Discipline

One of the main issues of church organization is to deal with discipline. How discipline helps to preserve church unity is sometimes a touchy subject and easily may be misunderstood. But from a biblical perspective, church discipline centers on two important areas: preserving purity of doctrine and preserving purity of church life and practice.

As we already have seen, the New Testament maintains the importance of preserving the purity of biblical teaching in the wake of apostasy and false teaching, particularly at the end of time. The same goes for preserving the respectability of the community by guarding against immorality, dishonesty, and depravity. For this reason the Scripture is spoken of as “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16, NKJV).

Read Matthew 16:19 and 18:15–20. What principles did Jesus give to the church regarding discipline and admonishing those who are at fault?

The Bible supports the concept of discipline and of our accountability to each other in our spiritual and moral lives. In fact, one of the distinguishing marks of the church is its holiness, or separation, from the world. We certainly find in the Bible many examples of difficult situations that required the church to act decisively against immoral behaviors. Moral standards must be maintained in the church.

What principles do these passages teach us to follow when addressing difficult issues in the church? Matt. 7:1–5; Gal. 6:1, 2.

We cannot deny the biblical teaching about the need of church discipline. We cannot be faithful to the Word without it. But notice the redemptive quality in many of these admonitions. As much as possible, discipline should be redemptive. We need to remember, too, that we are all sinners and that we all need grace. Thus, when we administer discipline we need to do it in humility and with a keen awareness of our own failings, as well.

In our dealings with those who err, how can we learn to act with an attitude of redemption more than of punishment?

Organizing for Mission

As we have seen throughout this quarter (and which bears repeating), as a church we have been organized and unified for mission, for outreach. We are not just a social club for like-minded people to get together and affirm each other in what we believe (though that can be important, as well). We have been brought together to share with the world the truth that we, ourselves, have come to love.

In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus gave His disciples final instructions for their mission to the world. Identify the key words of Jesus’ command. What do these words imply for the church today?

Jesus’ great commission to His disciples includes four key verbs: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. According to the Greek grammar of these verses, the main verb is to make disciples, and the other three verbs indicate how this can be done. Disciples are made when believers go to all nations to preach the gospel, baptize people, and teach them to observe what Jesus said.

As the church responds to this commission, God’s kingdom is enlarged, and more and more people of all nations join the ranks of those who accept Jesus as Savior. Their obedience to Jesus’ commands to be baptized and to observe His teachings creates a new universal family. The new disciples also are assured of the presence of Jesus every day as they themselves make more disciples. The presence of Jesus is a promise of the presence of God. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the announcement that the birth of Jesus is about “God with us” (*Matt. 1:23*) and ends with the promise of Jesus’ continued presence with us until His second coming.

“Christ did not tell His disciples that their work would be easy. . . . He assured them that He would be with them; and that if they would go forth in faith, they should move under the shield of Omnipotence. He bade them be brave and strong; for One mightier than angels would be in their ranks—the General of the armies of heaven. He made full provision for the prosecution of their work and took upon Himself the responsibility of its success. So long as they obeyed His word, and worked in connection with Him, they could not fail.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 29.

Reflect on the meaning of the promise of Jesus’ presence with His people until His second coming. How should the reality of this promise impact us as we seek to fulfill the commission that we have been given by Jesus?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Individual Responsibility and Christian Unity,” pp. 485–505, in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*; “Unity in Diversity,” pp. 483–485; “Church Discipline,” pp. 498–503, in *Gospel Workers*. Read the articles “Church,” pp. 707–710, and “Church Organization,” pp. 712–714, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“Principles of good leadership apply in all forms of society, including the church. However, the leader in the church must be more than a leader. He must also be a servant.

“There is an apparent contradiction between being a leader and being a servant. How can one lead and serve at the same time? Does not the leader occupy a position of honor? Does he not command and expect others to obey him? How, then, does he occupy the lower position of being a servant, of receiving orders and fulfilling them?

“In order to resolve the paradox we must look at Jesus. He supremely represented the principle of leadership that serves. His whole life was one of service. And at the same time He was the greatest leader the world has ever seen.”—G. Arthur Keough, *Our Church Today: What It Is and Can Be* (Washington, D.C., and Nashville: Review and Herald, 1980), p. 106.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the idea of a servant leader. What, if any, examples, can we find of this in the secular world?
- 2 Read again Matthew 20:25–28. What does this tell us about how God understands the meaning of the word “great” (*Matt. 20:26*) in contrast to how the word is understood by the world?
- 3 If one of the tasks of church leaders is to preserve unity, what should we do when church leaders falter, when their humanity prevents them from being perfect examples?
- 4 Why is it so important that we administer church discipline with a spirit of graciousness and love toward the ones who are erring? Why should Matthew 7:12 always be foremost in our minds during the process?

Summary: Good church organization is essential to the mission of the church and to the unity of believers. Christ is the Head of the church, and church leaders are to follow His example as they lead the people of God. Unity is preserved through the faithful teaching of the Word of God and by living in faithfulness to that Word.

My Wife Left Church

By DANIEL GATAN

My wife has stopped attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but I have not given up hope. Here's why.

During repressive Communist times, a woman in my home country, Romania, learned about the Adventist Church and began to attend Sabbath services regularly. This infuriated her husband.

"Where are you going at the same time every Saturday?" he asked.

"Honey, I am going to the Adventist church," she said.

"I already know that," he snapped. "You can keep going, but on one condition: You cannot be baptized. I don't want to hear that you've been baptized, or I'll kill you."

As the woman read the Bible and learned more about Jesus, she became convicted that she needed to take a public stand for Jesus through baptism.

Church members surrounded the newly baptized people after the Sabbath ceremony. They offered hugs and colorful flowers. Everyone was smiling except for one woman. She wasn't sure how her husband would react.

That afternoon, she found her husband in the front yard when she returned home with flowers in her arms. He was sitting at a wooden table with a sharp knife sticking out of the top.

"Where are the flowers from?" he asked.

"I was baptized today," she replied.

His face turned purple with rage.

"Did you not believe me when I told you that I would kill you if you were baptized?" he said, pulling the knife out of the tabletop. "Get ready to die," he said and lunged at her.

His wife fled to the back of the house, where the couple had a garden. Her husband caught up to her in the cornstalks. As he raised the knife over his head, the woman begged for one last wish: to pray. The husband agreed and watched as his wife knelt. He loomed over her as she spoke to God, holding the knife high above his head.

Suddenly, the knife blade silently slid out of the handle and fell harmlessly to the ground. The man's face turned pale. His whole body began to tremble, and he fell to the ground beside the blade. His wife jumped to her feet and helped him up. Wordlessly, they went into the house.

After some time, the husband was baptized. God changed his heart.

If God can change this man's heart, I know He also can touch my wife's heart. I can trust in God even when all hope seems lost.



DANIEL GATAN, 68, is a retired construction worker from Plosca, Romania.

Final Restoration of Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 14:1–3, Isa. 11:1–10, Rev. 21:1–5, 1 Thess. 4:13–18, Rev. 22:1–5, Isa. 35:4–10.*

Memory Text: “Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13, NKJV).

One of the greatest promises of the Bible is Jesus' promise to come again. Without it, we have nothing, because our hopes center in that promise and what it means for us. When Christ returns in the clouds of heaven, all that is earthly and human-made and thus temporary and at times meaningless will be swept away. After the millennium in heaven, this earth with its wars, famines, diseases, and tragedies will be made new and become the dwelling place of the redeemed, finally reunited with their Lord and with each other.

Hope in the second coming of Christ is a major theme of the New Testament, and for centuries Christians have longed for the fulfillment of this promise. We as Seventh-day Adventists also long for His return. Indeed, our name itself proclaims that hope.

In this final lesson, we look at this promise and what it means for Christian unity. Our oneness in Christ is often challenged by our human limitations and weaknesses. But we will no longer need to seek for solutions to our fragmentation, because there will be no fragmentation. At the Second Advent, we will be one with the Lord, finally reunited and forming one restored family.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 29.

The Certainty of Christ's Return

John 14:1–3 is the best-known promise of Jesus' second coming. What does this promise tell you about the kind of life the redeemed will live on the new earth?

Early Christians considered Christ's return the "blessed hope" (*Titus 2:13, NKJV*). They expected all the prophecies and promises of Scripture to be fulfilled at the Second Advent, for it is the very goal of the Christian pilgrimage. All who love Christ look forward to the day they will be able to share face-to-face fellowship with Him. His words in those verses suggest a closeness and intimacy that we will share, not only with Jesus but with each other, as well.

Christians believe in this promise because the Bible assures us of its fulfillment. We have this assurance because we believe in the words of Jesus, "I will come again" (*John 14:3, NKJV*). Just as Christ's first coming was prophesied, so His second coming also is foretold, even in the Old Testament. Before the Flood, God told the patriarch Enoch that the Messiah's coming in glory would put an end to sin. He prophesied, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him" (*Jude 14, 15, NKJV*).

A thousand years before Jesus came to this earth, King David also prophesied of the Messiah's coming to gather God's people together. "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent; a fire shall devour before Him, and it shall be very tempestuous all around Him. He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that He may judge His people: 'Gather My saints together to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice'" (*Ps. 50:3–5, NKJV*).

The second coming of Jesus is linked closely to His first advent. The prophecies that predicted His birth and ministry (for example, *Gen. 3:15; Mic. 5:2; Isa. 11:1; Dan. 9:25, 26*) are the foundation for our hope and trust in the promises about His second coming. Christ "has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. . . . So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (*Heb. 9:26, 28, NKJV*).

What are ways that you can even now draw hope and comfort from the promise of the Second Coming?

The Promise of Restoration

Read Isaiah 11:1–10. What promise is given to Israel, and what does it say about the eternal dwelling place of the redeemed?

The Bible begins with the story of the Creation of the earth (*Genesis* 1, 2). It is a description of a beautiful and harmonious world entrusted to our first parents, Adam and Eve. A perfect world and home for the human race, whom God had created. The Bible's last two chapters also speak of God's creating a perfect and harmonious world for redeemed humanity (*Revelation* 21, 22), but this time it is more accurate to say re-creation, the restoration of the earth from the ravages of sin.

In many places the Bible declares that this eternal home of the redeemed will be a real place, not an imagined fantasy or dream. The redeemed will be able to see, hear, smell, touch, and feel a new experience, a new life. The prophecy of Isaiah 11 is a beautiful passage foretelling the coming of the Messiah, who will create a new era. He will end all violence and usher in an eternal peace. The reign of God on this new earth will establish universal harmony.

Read Revelation 21:1–5. What will disappear forever as a result of this new harmony?

Ellen White wrote of what awaits the redeemed:

“As the years of eternity roll, they will bring richer and more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of His character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed beat with a stronger devotion, and they sweep the harps of gold with a firmer hand; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.”—Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, pp. 432, 433.

What are ways that we can understand even now the character of God? How does living in harmony and unity with others reveal something about the character and nature of God?

Resurrection and Restored Relationships

From the earliest days of the church the promise of Christ's return has, perhaps more than anything else, sustained the hearts of God's faithful people, especially during trials. Whatever their frightful struggles, whatever their inconsolable sorrows and pain, they had the hope of Christ's return and all the wonderful promises the Second Advent contains.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. What promises are included in this passage? What does this say about the hope of restored relationships?

Christ's second coming will affect all humanity in profound ways. An important aspect of the establishment of God's kingdom is the gathering of the elect. "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (*Matt. 24:31, NKJV*). At the moment of this gathering, the righteous dead will be resurrected and receive immortality (*1 Cor. 15:52, 53*). "The dead in Christ will rise first" (*1 Thess. 4:16, NKJV*). This is the moment we all have been waiting for. The resurrected ones will reunite with those who have been longing for their presence and love. This is how Paul exults at this event: "'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'" (*1 Cor. 15:55, NKJV*).

It is not the diseased, aged, disfigured bodies that went down into the grave that come up in the resurrection, but new, immortal, perfect bodies, no longer marked by the sin that caused their decay. The resurrected saints experience the completion of Christ's work of restoration, reflecting the perfect image of God intended at Creation (*Gen. 1:26, 1 Cor. 15:46–49*).

At the moment of Jesus' second advent, when the redeemed dead are resurrected, the righteous alive on earth will be changed and also be given new, perfect bodies. "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (*1 Cor. 15:53, NKJV*). So, these two groups of redeemed, the resurrected and transformed righteous, "shall be caught up together . . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (*1 Thess. 4:17, NKJV*).

In our scientific age, even some Christians try to find a natural explanation for everything, including "miracles." What does the promise of the resurrection teach us about why only the supernatural acts of God can save us?

A New Earth for the Redeemed

“ ‘For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind’ ” (*Isa. 65:17, NKJV*). Both Isaiah and John (*Rev. 21:1*) saw in vision the promised new earth.

Consider John’s description of the fabulous city of the redeemed, the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21:2, 9–27. What do these verses imply about the unity and harmony that will exist in this city?

Read Revelation 22:1–5. The river of life that flows from the throne of God with the tree of life that spans it are two other important features of the new city. What will be their purpose on the new earth?

The tree of life, which Adam lost access to through his transgression (*Gen. 3:22–24*), will be restored by Christ in the New Jerusalem. Access to this tree is one of the promises to those who overcome (*Rev. 2:7*). Its bearing twelve kinds of fruit, a new kind each month (*Rev. 22:2*), might possibly suggest a reason that in the new earth “ ‘from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me, says the LORD’ ” (*Isa. 66:23, NKJV*). The reference to the “healing of the nations” also underscores God’s intent to remove all barriers between people and to restore humanity to its original purpose: to restore all people, tribes, and nations into one undivided family, living in harmony and peace, united to give glory to God.

“ ‘The healing of the nations’ refers figuratively to the removal of all national and linguistic barriers and separation. . . . The leaves of the tree of life heal the breaches between nations. The nations are no longer ‘gentiles’ but are united into one family as the true people of God (*[compare]* *Rev. 21:24–26*). What Micah anticipated centuries earlier is now being fulfilled: ‘Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war. Each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree, with no one to make them afraid’ (*Mic. 4:3–4; [compare]* *Isa. 2:4*). There on the banks of the river of life the redeemed will ‘invite his neighbor to sit’ (*Zech. [3:]10*) with him under the tree of life. The curing quality of the leaves of the tree will heal all wounds—racial, ethnic, tribal, or linguistic—that have torn and divided humanity for ages.”—Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, p. 593.

Life on the New Earth

Read Isaiah 35:4–10 and 65:21–25. How different will life then be from what we experience now?

Several times in the book of Isaiah we read of something new: “new things” (42:9, 48:6), “a new song” (42:10), “a new thing” (43:19), “a new name” (62:2). What is new in chapter 65 is a new order of things. There is peace and harmony among all God’s creatures. The covenant curses on the land for disobedience and rebellion (*see Lev. 26:14–17, Deut. 28:30*) will be canceled forever, because sin is no more. Instead, there will be abundance of blessings, houses to live in, and food to enjoy.

What will life be like in such a beautiful place? Some people wonder if we will be able to recognize our friends and family, after our bodies receive immortality and are fully restored into God’s image. After Christ’s resurrection, His disciples were able to recognize Him. Mary recognized His voice (*John 20:11–16*). Thomas recognized Jesus’ physical appearance (*John 20:27, 28*). The two disciples of Emmaus recognized His mannerisms at the dinner table (*Luke 24:30, 31, 35*). So, if our bodies are to be similar to Jesus’ resurrected body, we certainly will be able to recognize each other, and we can look forward to an eternity of restored relationships. We safely can assume that we will continue our relationships with those we know and love and who are there with us.

“There the redeemed shall know, even as also they are known. The loves and sympathies which God Himself has planted in the soul shall there find truest and sweetest exercise. The pure communion with holy beings, the harmonious social life with the blessed angels and with the faithful ones of all ages who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, the sacred ties that bind together ‘the whole family in heaven and earth’ (*Ephesians 3:15*)—these help to constitute the happiness of the redeemed.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 677.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. . . . For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16–18, NKJV). How can we in a world that’s so temporal, so fleeting, learn to reach out and grasp the unseen and eternal?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “‘Behold, I Come Quickly,’ ” pp. 355–359, in *Counsels for the Church*. Read the articles “Resurrection,” pp. 1082–1084, and “Heaven and New Earth,” pp. 863, 864, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“The resurrection and ascension of our Lord is a sure evidence of the triumph of the saints of God over death and the grave, and a pledge that heaven is open to those who wash their robes of character and make them white in the blood of the Lamb. Jesus ascended to the Father as a representative of the human race, and God will bring those who reflect His image to behold and share with Him His glory.

“There are homes for the pilgrims of earth. There are robes for the righteous, with crowns of glory and palms of victory. All that has perplexed us in the providences of God will in the world to come be made plain. The things hard to be understood will then find explanation. The mysteries of grace will unfold before us. Where our finite minds discovered only confusion and broken promises, we shall see the most perfect and beautiful harmony. We shall know that infinite love ordered the experiences that seemed most trying. As we realize the tender care of Him who makes all things work together for our good, we shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels for the Church*, p. 358.

Discussion Question:

1 Though other Christians (but not all) believe in the literal second coming of Jesus, what is unique about the Adventist hope in the second coming of Christ?

2 Two fish were swimming when one said to the other, “How’s the water?”

The other fish answered: “What’s water?”

The point is that we can get so used to things that we don’t realize just how prevalent they are. For instance, how can we, as beings born in sin, filled with sin, and living in a sinful world, really get a good grasp on what a wonderful new existence we will have in the new heavens and new earth? Why, whatever the limitations, should we still try to envision what it will be like?

3 There’s no question that, whatever our existence will be like in the new earth, we will live in unity with everyone. What can we do, right now, to help prepare ourselves for when that happens?

Summary: The Bible speaks confidently of the time this earth will be recreated and the ravages of sin erased forever. At last humanity will be restored to its original purpose, and all people will live in harmony. Our current spiritual oneness in Christ, though not now fully realized, will then be a living and eternal reality.

My Bucket List

By BOB STUART

The doctor looked me straight in the eye.

“You have inoperable prostate cancer,” he said. “You have 18 months to live.”

Back at home, my family and I sat down to compile a bucket list of things to accomplish in my last 18 months. One of my four sons said he wanted to go on a cross-country bike ride with me. Another son spoke of running a half marathon in Seattle. My daughter wanted to cut a music CD together.

Then I thought to myself, *What do I want to do?* The answer was easy. I wanted to do more to share the gospel. I decided to bring at least one person to church every month.

My first chance to extend an invitation came two days later when someone asked me, “Bob, how’s your cancer?”

I told her about my bucket list and my plan to invite people to church. “Would you be willing to help me fulfill my bucket list by coming to church next Sabbath?” I said.

The woman looked at me with compassion. She saw this as a last wish. “Of course, I’ll come,” she said.

I have 2,200 clients a year, so I have a golden opportunity when they inquire about my health. It’s so easy to invite them to church.

At least two people—a married couple—have been baptized, and their eldest daughter will be baptized in a few weeks. Today, the wife leads a children’s Sabbath School class and is bringing other people to church.

“I’ll keep your gift going,” she told me. “I’ve got kids and their parents coming to church.”

Anyone can have a bucket list. It might be 20 years or more before you die, but you can start fulfilling that bucket list today by inviting someone to church every month. Imagine how quickly the Seventh-day Adventist Church would grow if each of the church’s 20 million members brought in just one person a year. Conceivably our church membership could double in just 12 months.

Twenty-seven months have passed since the doctor gave me 18 months to live. I have invited many people to church, and about half have come.

The bucket list has become a lot of fun. It’s wonderful to hear people say, “Yes, I will commit to visiting your church.” But the most gratifying moment of all is when they actually come. They hug you and sit with you in church. They become part of your family.



BOB STUART, 68, is a serial entrepreneur based in College Place, Washington.

During the first quarter 2019, we will study Revelation and focus on the book's major parts and themes. Our guide, entitled *The Book of Revelation* by Ranko Stefanovic, reveals Jesus Christ, His life, His death, and His ministry on behalf of His people.

Revelation was written from Christ's perspective. It is only through Him that the book's symbols and images receive their ultimate meaning and significance. Revelation's prophecies are analyzed and applied using the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, which teaches that prophecy follows the flow of history, from antiquity to the end of the world. We will make every effort to derive meaning from the text itself, studying its language, imagery, and context.

Revelation promises blessings to those who read or listen to its words, and who heed and keep the admonitions found therein. As we analyze this book, you are invited to discover the things that you need to hear, and heed, as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lesson 1—The Gospel From Patmos

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Title of the Book** (*Rev. 1:1, 2*)

MONDAY: **The Purpose of the Book** (*Rev. 1:1*)

TUESDAY: **The Symbolic Language of Revelation** (*Rev. 1:1*)

WEDNESDAY: **The Godhead** (*Rev. 1:4, 5*)

THURSDAY: **The Keynote of Revelation** (*Rev. 1:7, 8*)

Memory Text—*Revelation 1:3, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Revelation's prophecies are an expression of God's care for His people. They point us to the shortness and fragility of this life, but also to salvation in Jesus, and our calling to spread the gospel.

Lesson 2—Among the Lampstands

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **On Patmos** (*Rev. 1:9*)

MONDAY: **On the Lord's Day** (*Rev. 1:10*)

TUESDAY: **Encountering Christ on Patmos** (*Rev. 1:12–18*)

WEDNESDAY: **Christ's Messages for Then and Now** (*Rev. 1:11, 19, 20*)

THURSDAY: **Message to the Church in Ephesus** (*Rev. 2:1–4*)

Memory Text—*Revelation 3:21, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: The Lord revealed to John some of life's mysteries and the struggles it brings. The sanctuary scene shown to him provided John with the assurance of Christ's presence and care—an assurance that he passed on to the churches and to the succeeding generations of Christians until the end of this world.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audio CD to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services for the Blind, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981; email: info@christianrecord.org; Web site: www.christianrecord.org.